ROU BAO BU CHI ROU
The Husky & His White Cat Shizun
3
ERHA HE TA DE BAI MAO SHIZUN

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The Husky & His White Cat Shizun

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ERHA HE TA DE BAI MAO SHIZUN VOL. 3

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Chapter 89:
This Venerable One's Past Affair with You

WHEN MO RAN AWOKE, it was already bright, and the sun was high in the sky. He rolled over and blinked—to his surprise, Chu Wanning was still fast asleep.

Perhaps it was the effect of the Tapir Fragrance Dew, or perhaps it was because of his poor health of late along with bouts of fitful sleep troubled by dreams, that he was still deep in slumber even at this hour. His back was turned to Mo Ran, and long, inky hair spilled loose across pillow and bed, its strands the color of the night.

Mo Ran eyed him.

If the teacher hadn't yet risen, there was no reason for the student to be particularly industrious. The bed was too comfortable; he might as well stay in it a little longer. But just lying there was boring, so Mo Ran scooched closer and began to play with Chu Wanning's hair.

Chu Wanning's hair always smelled faintly of flowers. Soft as smoke, fine as mist; it was one of Mo Ran's favorite things to touch. He combed his fingers through those misty strands. The feel of them, smooth as satin wrapped around his fingers, made his insides tingle. A breeze swept through the window, and the dark, patterned bed curtains drifted gently in its wake.

Mo Ran narrowed his eyes. Certain parts of him were especially energetic in the morning, and with such a pleasant sensation at his fingertips, one that was so familiar, so…

He lifted a lock of Chu Wanning's hair to his nose and inhaled. Those long, soft strands called to mind scenes from the bygone past.

Since his rebirth, Mo Ran had tried his best not to think too much about the more salacious portions of his history with Chu Wanning. But for some reason, this morning, he felt like indulging in reminiscence. His throat felt a little dry. He didn't want to touch Chu Wanning's body anymore, but his hair should be fine. Mo Ran closed his eyes and pressed his lips lightly to the inky darkness between his fingers. This inky darkness…

Back then, at Sisheng Peak's Wushan Palace, this same inky darkness had fallen around Mo Ran like a curtain. He had held that man's slender waist in his hands, the feeling of lean muscle beneath his fingers so different from that of a woman.

Chu Wanning straddled Mo Ran's hips and worked himself up and down. It must have hurt; his sharp brows were drawn tightly together, and motes of light glistened in those phoenix eyes tinged a vivid red by ferocity and despair. He was so resentful, so unwilling, yet so helplessly pitiful.

Exulting in his victory, Mo Ran made his demands, his voice steady yet not without malice. "Faster."

No reply.

"Are you tired already? You're moving so slowly."

But even like this, Chu Wanning's ironclad will was firm, and he refused to yield. He exhaled, hatred plain in his teary, red-rimmed eyes. Then he bit down on his lip and began to move, fast and rough, almost as if punishing himself.

It was agony.

He did it again and again. Even when his arched back began to shudder and cold sweat drenched his body, still he didn't beg, didn't make a sound. Through the long, inky locks obscuring Chu Wanning's

vision, Mo Ran's eyes were bright in the black of night, burning with animalistic desire, madness, ecstasy, gratification.

"Ngh!" A stifled groan—it seemed the man on top of him could finally withstand the pain no longer. Mo Ran's eyes darkened, and he sat up without warning, wrapping his arms around Chu Wanning's trembling, sweat-soaked body, which, for all his desperate endurance, was still wracked with the faintest shivers. The change in position only sheathed Mo Ran deeper inside him, until he felt his stomach might be pierced through.

That cruel, ruthless person caressed him, his touch tender yet laced with venom. "Chu Wanning, did you ever think you'd end up like this, sitting in my lap, taking my cock?" Mo Ran held him tightly, fucking slowly in and out. He nuzzled Chu Wanning intimately, and a shudder ran through him. "Yuheng of the Night Sky, Beidou Immortal… *heh*, in the end, you still had to spread your legs and beg me to fuck you."

His hands wandered along Chu Wanning's waist, and he thrust in deep, reveling in the feeling of Chu Wanning clenched tight around his cock. Mo Ran was intoxicated; there were practically fireworks going off in his chest—but he put up a front of calm indifference as he tormented and humiliated the man astride him. "Didn't you call me lowly? Didn't you look down on me? But Chu Wanning, now it's you who seeks my favor." He sank his teeth viciously into Chu Wanning's jaw. "Look down, look at how you're sucking me in, hm? Between the two of us, who's the more lowly here, my dear shizun?"

Silent, shivering, Chu Wanning closed his eyes. He didn't want to hear such filthy words. It was his first time…

It was with the person he had once liked, yet it was torture worse than death.

“Open your eyes,” came the callous order by his ear. “I still have Xue Meng. You know what I’ll do if you disobey.”

He had no choice. Slowly, he opened eyes brimming with tears he refused to let fall. The hand on his jaw forced him to look down at the sight of himself taking his disciple’s cock. The sound of flesh against flesh, the stickiness of blood mixed with thick fluid—all of it was unbearably wanton.

“Up a little.”

There was no strength in his legs, but he didn’t want Mo Ran’s help; the last tattered piece of his dignity lifted his body by force of will alone. The hardness inside him slid out until only the engorged head was pressed to his entrance. Mo Ran wrapped his hand around his own length and thrust in shallowly a few times, just enough for Chu Wanning to see himself breached. Chu Wanning’s lashes quivered—from pain, or humiliation, or arousal.

“You are such a slut,” Mo Ran breathed. “If I’d known sooner, I would’ve fucked you back when I was your disciple.”

He was an uncultured scoundrel after all, with no manners or elegance to speak of. Those vulgar words slipped into Chu Wanning’s heart like a blade. He lifted his head, closed his eyes, and spoke for the first time that night in a voice raspy and raw: “Mo Ran, just kill me.”

The hand on his waist twitched imperceptibly. Then Mo Ran smiled, sweet as ever, the bow of his mouth framed by a pair of charming dimples. “Okay.”

Chu Wanning’s eyes flew open. In those tear-filled eyes that made his blood boil with arousal, Mo Ran saw the reflection of his own twisted smile.

“If you want to die, I won’t stop you. But you don’t get to choose how. I’ll let a thousand people fuck you while your good little disciple

Xue Meng looks on. Actually, Xue Meng should join in too. How about that?"

"You—!"

His cruel words stung Chu Wanning like venom, and, like the scorpion, Mo Ran watched his work with glee: watched the blood drain from Chu Wanning's face, his lightly parted lips trembling despite his restraint. Mo Ran suddenly felt a deep sense of satisfaction—colored with pity, but also with delight and arousal. He pulled Chu Wanning back into his arms and buried his cock deep inside, thrusting relentlessly into him at a pace unforgiving, almost frenzied. "Ha, you're so gullible? You actually believed that?" He let out a deep laugh and kissed Chu Wanning ravenously, his hands kneading and stroking him as he said between heavy breaths, "Don't think too hard. I was just messing with you."

Chu Wanning seemed about to fall to pieces with every thrust; more than that, it was as if his soul itself had shattered.

"Just messing with you." Mo Ran's breaths came in harsh pants. It wasn't enough—he pushed Chu Wanning to the floor and leaned over him, bearing down heavily and lifting Chu Wanning's leg to thrust deeper as he snapped his hips with abandon. "How could I bear to let anyone else touch you like that…you're mine…only *I* get to…"

Pale, slender fingers scrabbled against the ground but found no purchase. In the end, Chu Wanning was powerless; he could only let Mo Ran do as he pleased until his consciousness began to fade, and the light in his eyes grew dim.

Chu Wanning suddenly lifted his arm and covered his eyes. "Mo Ran," he said softly. "Mo Ran, if you still have any compassion in you…any conscience…" His lashes shuddered against the back of his hand. "Please…don't do this anymore… Mo Ran." His voice broke on a

sob.

It was the first time in Mo Ran's past life that he saw Chu Wanning cry.

"Mo Ran, I can't take it anymore… It hurts…"

Chu Wanning rolled over, jolting Mo Ran out of his debauched reverie. The past dissipated like a scattering of birds, leaving only his heart to pound against his ribcage. The long strands between his fingers slipped away as the person from his memories turned toward him, his face so close now that Mo Ran could see each individual eyelash.

How beautiful, he thought.

Objectively speaking, Chu Wanning's looks weren't gentle or soft by any measure. His features were handsome, sharp and intense as if cut by blades, and in truth more masculine than average. But that only made him all the more enticing. Mo Ran wanted to see this proud, unbending man come undone beneath him. His heart beat faster and faster. He stared at Chu Wanning's face, and his gaze drifted, inch by inch, until it came to rest on those pale lips, lightly parted in sleep.

He leaned in unconsciously. A little closer and their lips would meet. The sweet taste of dew. Mo Ran's throat worked as he swallowed; his mouth felt dry. A little closer, just a little more…almost.

Suddenly, a flash of clarity shot through his arousal-addled mind. He froze, face deathly pale. *What was he doing?!*

Mo Ran sat up swiftly and stared at the man on the bed. Chu Wanning, Chu Wanning…no matter how many times he'd bedded him, that was all in the past now! The fuck was he doing—had he lost his mind?! Was it possible he really *did* like him?

Mo Ran blanched further at the thought, so unsettled he couldn't

think straight. He drew in a deep breath and buried his face in his hands, scrubbing it roughly. Then, cursing under his breath, he pulled on his outer robe and swept out of the room as if running away.

Chapter 90:
This Venerable One's Idiom Explanation Is Just Fine

By the time Chu Wanning finally woke up, it was noon. The Tapir Fragrance Dew was certainly quite effective; he had managed to get a full night's rest, undisturbed by dreams. He sat up leisurely and yawned.

"Mo Ran?" That disciple of his loved sleep far more than he, so it was a surprise not to find him still curled up on the floor. Chu Wanning blinked, then called for him again.

No reply.

He stood and smoothed his robes, brushing through the wispy strands of his long hair and pulling it up as he padded toward the screen dividing the room. The divider bore an elegantly painted image of wild birds soaring through a cloud bank woven between mountain peaks. Steam rose from behind it—someone was bathing on the other side.

He hesitated before the screen and tried again. "Mo Ran." Still, there was no reply. Growing suspicious, Chu Wanning knocked on the wooden frame of the divider. After several more attempts with no response, he finally furrowed his brow and walked around the screen.

This part of the room was intended for washing and bathing, and a large bath barrel of camphor wood stood right in the middle. Chu Wanning glanced at it hastily—it was filled with hot, steamy water, and bathing herbs set out earlier by the inn floated on its surface. But right now, there was no one to be seen.

He looked around again and spied Mo Ran's clothes folded neatly over the wooden frame. He couldn't possibly have bathed and then run out naked, could he?

Chu Wanning's temples throbbed as he shoved that terrifying thought aside, his lips pressed tightly together and face slightly ashen. He turned and was about to leave when he heard gurgling from behind him. Chu Wanning looked back to see bubbles rising to the water's surface from beneath the herbs and petals floating in the barrel. Was someone inside?

No sooner had the thought crossed his mind than a naked young man sprang from the barrel with a splash, like a dragon soaring out of the water. Chu Wanning was so startled he inadvertently stumbled back two steps.

It seemed Mo Ran had been holding his breath underwater, and so didn't hear Chu Wanning calling for him outside. When he could hold it no longer, he stood, fully exposing the upper half of his body. He shook the water from his hair like a dog drying itself, splashing all of it right onto Chu Wanning's robes.

"Mo Ran!"

"Ah!" Mo Ran froze mid-shake, eyes wide and round. He clearly hadn't expected Chu Wanning to be there and gasped, "Shizun!"

"You…" Chu Wanning's eyes swept across the young man's well-proportioned figure. Mo Ran's shoulders had already become quite broad, the lines of his body firm and defined, supple and youthfully taut. Droplets of water traced the contours of his toned chest, gathering in thin rivulets that trickled down, dazzling under the sunlight.

He looked like a beautiful merman—half out of the water, eyes glistening, a few stray petals caught in the wet hair that clung to his body. Mo Ran wiped the water from his face and leaned toward Chu Wanning with a grin, his shoulder blades flexing like a leopard's as he folded his arms over the edge of the bath and tilted his head to beam brightly up at him.

Chu Wanning found himself a little dizzy, his face a little warm, and he asked without thinking, "What are you doing?"

"Taking a bath."

"In the morning?"

"He he." Mo Ran chuckled guiltily—he was actually rinsing with cold water in an attempt to put out the fire in his loins. It had worked well enough; but then, since he had already stripped, he felt he might as well take a bath while he was at it. The soak had put him in a good mood, so he had dived down to practice holding his breath. He certainly hadn't anticipated that Chu Wanning would wander in like this.

"What's with that goofy smile?" Chu Wanning knitted his brows, trying to cover up the heat steaming his brain with a cool tone of voice. "Why didn't you wake me if you were up early? Messing around like this, throwing your clothes all over the place, where are your man—"

"Shizun. You got some water on your face." There was a splash as Mo Ran lifted his hand to wipe Chu Wanning's cheek.

"—ners."

Mo Ran laughed. He had forgotten that his hand was wet, too, and would only make Chu Wanning's cheek even wetter.

Chu Wanning stood frozen, the air around him cooling by several degrees. His expression was strained, his lips pressed together; only his eyelashes quivered now and then. He felt like he was trying to train a hunting dog, only to get nuzzled by the crafty pup instead. "Get out and

get dressed. We have to head back to the sect." In the end, Chu Wanning tossed out these words with a frosty expression and left with a swish of his sleeves.

But, where Mo Ran couldn't see, the tips of Chu Wanning's ears were red. Just like how, where Chu Wanning couldn't see, that pair of dewy eyes, still tinged with yearning and swimming with complicated feelings, stared helplessly after him until he disappeared around the corner.

The endearing smile slid off Mo Ran's face, replaced by a look of frustration. He smacked the water in annoyance, then scooped up a handful and scrubbed mercilessly at his face.

What the actual hell.

What was *wrong* with him today? All he did was look at Chu Wanning a little while bathing and touch his cheek briefly. He had just managed to suppress his arousal, and now he was hard again…

"Weren't you just getting dressed? What took you so long?" Chu Wanning chided. He turned from his place by the window in obvious exasperation. His robes fluttered gently in the breeze, and fine strands of hair caressed his jade-like cheeks.

Mo Ran coughed. "I was drying my hair with a spell," he mumbled vaguely, "but I'm n-not very good at it, so it took a while. Sorry to keep Shizun waiting."

Such uncharacteristic propriety caught Chu Wanning a bit off guard. He shot his disciple another glance before saying, "If you're done washing, go get packed. We can go rent a boat. I don't feel like riding swords, and I'm tired of horses too. Let's go by water and enjoy some sightseeing on the way."

"Okay, sounds good." Mo Ran didn't dare look at him for too long,

coughing a few more times to cover his unease.

Chu Wanning frowned. “What’s wrong with your throat?”

“…Nothing.” Mo Ran turned hastily to go pack.

They stopped at a store to pick up some snacks and dry goods for the trip, then made their way to the docks to rent a vessel.

The pair sailed down the Yangtze River. Whenever they came to an area impassable by water, they unfurled the wooden wings of the boat and soared through the air on a magical draft instead. This method of travel wasn’t swift, but it was peaceful and relaxing.

Eight days later, they arrived at Sisheng Peak. The wooden boat slid down the current to dock by the mountain gate.

Mo Ran lifted the bamboo curtain, allowing Chu Wanning to step out from the cabin first before following himself. The hour was late, and the moon hung bright overhead. The Yuheng Elder had written to Xue Zhengyong with explicit instructions not to send a reception, so they encountered no one until they’d already climbed the stairs to the main gate. There, four disciples guarded the entrance.

“Yuheng Elder!”

“Mo-gongzi!”

For some reason, panic flashed across the disciples’ faces at the sight of them. Before either could react, all four dropped to their knees and looked up at the pair. “Elder, Gongzi,” they entreated urgently, “there are people inside who’ve come to seek retribution against you! The sect leader sent a messenger bird to tell you to stay away, but it looks like that fat bird was too slow! Please go hide in Wuchang Town for a while—whatever you do, don’t go inside right now!”

Chu Wanning narrowed his eyes. “What is the matter, why are you

all so panicked?"

"It's people from the upper cultivation realm! They're accusing the elder of demonic cultivation, and they want to haul you off to Tianyin Pavilion for an inquiry!"

"Tianyin Pavilion?" Mo Ran repeated, alarmed. "Isn't that the prison set up by all ten great sects, reserved for the most heinous of criminals?"

"That's the one! Th-they're here about that incident at Butterfly Town!" one of the four, a young woman, said anxiously. "Does the elder remember? That time you were caned as punishment!"

"At *most* that was a misuse of cultivation techniques or involving ordinary people. Besides, Shizun has already accepted punishment for it. Why have they suddenly dragged out that old affair again—and even gone so far as to involve Tianyin Pavilion." Mo Ran frowned. "And what's this about demonic cultivation?"

"We don't know the details, either. But we heard everyone in Butterfly Town died overnight, killed by some half-ghost, half-deity entity that appeared to be acting at someone's behest. The ghost-deity is incredibly powerful, and the average wandering cultivator definitely wouldn't be able to order her about, so those people from the upper cultivation realm s-suspect that Yuheng Elder did it!"

Chu Wanning had no words.

"Pfft," Mo Ran laughed. "And here I was getting all worried. This is a simple misunderstanding, easy enough to explain. There's no need to hide." He turned to grin at Chu Wanning. "Shizun, can you believe these people? Expel some small fiend, and they'll say you're taking opportunities from the youngsters; purge a major demon and they'll accuse you of practicing demonic cultivation and keeping a ghost-deity to do your bidding. At this rate, we'd best stop doing anything at all and

sit home meditating all day like they do."

But Chu Wanning wasn't laughing. His expression was terrible, and he stood quietly for a time before asking, "Every single person at Butterfly Town is dead?"

"That's what I heard. Not one survivor."

Chu Wanning closed his eyes, silent.

The female disciple noticed his strange expression. "Elder?" she asked uneasily.

"This incident was not my doing, but it may have occurred because I was not sufficiently thorough in the exorcism. If I am indeed to blame, then I will not shirk responsibility." Chu Wanning opened his eyes slowly. "Mo Ran, let's go in."

The walls of Loyalty Hall were lined with twelve lamps of coiling bronze. Each lamp was ten feet tall with nine layers of branches extending from the central stand, short toward the top and longer toward the bottom. The three hundred and fifty-six candle lanterns on these branches lit the main hall of Sisheng Peak so brightly that the night was practically indistinguishable from day.

Xue Zhengyong, dressed in full martial attire, stood straight-backed on the high dais of the hall. He looked like a cast-iron statue as he stared down the people below with the eyes of a predator. "Li-zhuangzhu, I'll say it one last time. The Yuheng Elder is not at the sect right now. Moreover, I can vouch with my very life that what happened at Butterfly Town was no doing of his. So quit throwing around all these baseless…whatchamacallit…"

Next to him, Madam Wang whispered discreetly from behind her sleeve, "Accusations."

"*Ahem*, quit throwing around all these baseless whatchamacallit accusations!" Xue Zhengyong declared with an imposing sweep of his hand.

Madam Wang was at a loss for words.

Not counting Sisheng Peak's own guard disciples, some thirty people waited in the hall. The group was dressed in jade-green robes, carried horsetail whisks in their arms, and wore square, black gauze jinxian hats—obviously disciples from the recently established and rapidly rising Bitan Manor of the upper cultivation realm. The man at their head was in his fifties, with a pair of long whiskers that stuck out from the sides of his face and drifted in the slight draft like those of a catfish. This was none other than the Bitan Manor leader himself, Li Wuxin.

"Xue-zhangmen," Li Wuxin sneered as he twirled a whisker, "I'm only here to reason with you because your sect is yet considered a righteous one. The tragedy at Butterfly Town occurred after your Yuheng Elder and his disciples performed an exorcism there. Other than these three, the Chen household had no contact whatsoever with any cultivators. We have evidence and witnesses both. You have no choice but to admit fault in this matter."

Xue Meng, standing next to his father, couldn't take it anymore. "And what fucking right do you lot have to speak? When have you ever taken it upon yourselves to deal with the problems of the lower cultivation realm? All you ever do is sit on your hands trying to cultivate yourselves to immortality. Then the moment something happens you rush down here and try to lay the blame on my shizun! What kind of justice is that?!"

"Xue-gongzi." Rather than get mad, Li Wuxin leveled a meaningful look at him and smiled. "I've heard of you; people call you the son of

the phoenix. But meeting you in person today and seeing for myself your, heh, poise and composure, has certainly been, shall we say, an *eye-opening* experience."

"You—!"

Li Wuxin rolled his eyes and turned back to Xue Zhengyong. "Xue-zhangmen, we of the upper cultivation realm practice strict adherence to the laws, and we intend to get to the bottom of this. If you really refuse to cooperate and will not hand over Yuheng, Mo Ran, and the rest, then I shall have no choice but to entreat the foremost sect of the cultivation world, Rufeng Sect, to take charge of the investigation themselves!"

Xue Zhengyong had always had a fierce temper. He scoffed at this threat. "I'm well aware that your Bitan Manor is chummy with Rufeng Sect, but even if Nangong Liu himself stood before me today, I'd tell him the same thing—I will not hand them over. This has nothing to do with Yuheng."

"Well then," said Xue Meng, hot on his heels, "Li-zhuangzhu, kindly see yourself out."

"See that? Did everyone see that?! Do you see how difficult and unreasonable they are—they're aiding and abetting criminals!" A man's shaky voice burst from the crowd. "It was the same back then, when that Mo character stole my friend's things. We came here courteously seeking justice, and they brushed us off and kicked us out just like this! Li-zhuangzhu, you saw it too, right? If Sisheng Peak is allowed to continue acting so outrageously, considering themselves above the law, then the lower cultivation realm will be done for!"

He had barely finished when a low chuckle came from the hall's entrance.

Everyone turned toward the door. There, in the shadows where the light spilling from the hall did not reach, stood a blue-robed young

man in light armor. He leaned casually against the intricately carved vermilion doorframe and watched the scene within the hall with a languid expression. This youth was extremely handsome, his supple and firm skin practically glowing under the candlelight.

"Pray tell, Chang-gongzi, when exactly did I ever steal anything from your friend?" His smile was soft and charming, "That Rong San… or was it Rong Jiu? I can't remember. Anyway, that pretty boy, is he your friend or your paramour? Rather deceptive of you to only tell part of the story, hm? What if you hurt his feelings?"

The man complaining so woefully was none other than that merchant Chang from Yizhou, the very same who had declared that Sisheng Peak hadn't seen the last of him all those months ago.

Chang-gongzi whipped his head around, startled to see Mo Ran. But then something flickered in his eyes, and he howled in misery, "Mo Weiyu, you bastard! My friendship with Jiu-er is like that of mortar and pestle,[1] perfectly innocent. He's already died so tragically at the hands of your fiendish ilk, yet you—you still dare slander his name!"

"What?" A chill ran down Mo Ran's spine, and his eyes widened slightly. "Rong Jiu is dead?"

"His parents are from Butterfly Town," Chang-gongzi went on, angry and tearful. "He met with misfortune while visiting home some days ago. That's how I learned of you and your shizun's evil deeds! That's why I went to Li-zhuangzhu for justice!"

Mo Ran's opinion of Rong Jiu was far from positive, so after the initial shock had passed, he dismissed Chang-gongzi with a curt wave of his hand. "Friendship of mortar and pestle? So, what, you're the pestle and he's the mortar, *pound pound pound*? Not sure how that's innocent, but okay."

"M-Mo Ran!" Chang-gongzi hadn't expected this and was quite

affronted. “Y-you illiterate reprobate! You, you—”

“*Ahem*…” It was a bit much for Madam Wang too.

Only Xue Zhengyong blinked and said nothing. Mortar this and pestle that, whatever that meant, it couldn’t be anything good; he felt like his nephew’s words made quite a lot of sense actually. Nothing wrong with ’em.

From the darkness of the night outside the hall came a sigh like the shattering of jade, or the first melt of a frozen-over lake, deep and indescribably lovely. A slender, well-proportioned hand reached out…

And delivered an unceremonious slap right across Mo Ran’s face.

“Such obscenity. ‘Friendship of mortar and pestle’ means a friendship that disregards status and means, like that between Gong Shamu and Wu You.” Chu Wanning appeared in the doorway, expression dark and tone cross. “What are you doing hanging around the door being an embarrassment? Get the hell inside!”

“Shizun!”

“Shizun!”

Xue Meng and Shi Mei, overjoyed, rushed forward to greet him. But Xue Zhengyong’s eyes widened in exasperation. “Yuheng, what are you doing back here?”

“How long were you planning to hold out by yourself if I didn’t come?” Chu Wanning strode serenely into Loyalty Hall, his handsome face like that of an immortal under the candlelight, unsurpassed in grace and elegance. He came to a stop before the golden seat within the hall and exchanged a nod with Xue Zhengyong, then turned toward the petitioners with a flourish of his wide sleeves.

“Chu Wanning of Sisheng Peak, humble bearer of the title Yuheng Elder. It seems you have questions for me; I would not refuse you

answers.” Li Wuxin stared in shock, but Chu Wanning, his phoenix eyes like smoke, spared him the barest glance before continuing in an even tone, “Kindly do enlighten me.”

Chapter 91:
This Venerable One's Shizun Is a Pro

THIS MAN'S ELEGANT ROBES were white as snow against the backdrop of the great hall. He stood in the hall with his hands folded neatly behind him, the silk of his robes soft as airy clouds and his expansive sleeves brushing the ground. His expression appeared solemn and dignified, but upon closer inspection, his eyes were slightly lifted, and his lashes draped down—beneath that veneer of politeness lay scorn and superiority in equal measure.

Li Wuxin had never dreamed that *this* was the Yuheng Elder. His face instantly fell. "Chu, Chu—"

"Li-zhuangzhu," Chu Wanning said calmly, "long time no see."

"How could it be you?" Li Wuxin's face was as pale as dry wax. His silver tongue that had been flapping away a moment ago tied itself into a knot as he stuttered, "We haven't heard a word from you since you left Rufeng Sect. Here we thought you went off to wander the world; yet who knew you—you were actually down here in the muck, casting pearls before swine!"

Chu Wanning snorted, his eyes cool. "You think I'm a pearl? I'm flattered."

Li Wuxin was too flabbergasted to reply.

"Now, enough small talk. Let's come to the point: I hear you think I've murdered the five hundred civilians of Butterfly Town to practice dark magic. This was not done by my hand, but seeing as Li-zhuangzhu has come all this way, I assume there have already been a few misunderstandings. I'm afraid I have more important affairs to attend to,

so I won't be accompanying you to Tianyin Pavilion. If you have any questions you'd like to ask, you are welcome to do so now."

With that, Chu Wanning took his seat with a sweep of his sleeves, as though even standing would be too much effort for him. Every elder had a designated seat within the Loyalty Hall, and Chu Wanning's was situated to the left of Xue Zhengyong's, lined with a fine bamboo mat and obscured by a half-lowered bamboo screen. Compared to the Lucun Elder's seat beside it, which overflowed with fresh blossoms, Chu Wanning's appeared incredibly meager and simple.

In the years since he had left Rufeng Sect, Chu Wanning had never made deliberate attempts to conceal his name—but it wouldn't be inaccurate to say he'd kept a low profile. While the younger generation of Bitan Manor had heard of him, they had no notion of how powerful he was. Li Wuxin was a different story. He'd been around the block in the upper cultivation realm. How could he not know of the infamous Yuheng Elder?

He clenched his fists tight within his sleeves as he stole several glances at Chang-gongzi.

Had he not already accepted a lavish advance payment from the Chang family, he could have steered clear of this disastrous situation. At the time, he'd thought the Yuheng Elder of Sisheng Peak was just some small-time cultivator of little repute. How was he to know that it was Chu Wanning, who had been out of the public eye for so long? If he had, he would never have let himself get roped into this mess, no matter how generous the compensation. Now he was stuck, unable to advance or retreat. What should he do…?

Li Wuxin kept his expression carefully neutral, but inside he was miserable.

It was then that one of his disciples decided to flaunt his

ignorance. Believing it was this Yuheng Elder who was the unreasonable one and his master was at a loss for how to handle the man, the disciple spoke up, thinking himself rather clever. “Elder Chu, you recently traveled to Butterfly Town to perform an exorcism, did you not?”

Chu Wanning peered out from under his lashes and gave the young man a look. “That is correct.”

“Then were you also the one who sealed that ghost bride?”

“Are you speaking of Luo Xianxian?”

“I…” The young man’s words died on his lips. He only knew that the evil creature that visited disaster upon Butterfly Town was a ghost bride; he didn’t know much more than that. When Chu Wanning turned the question back on him, he had no response. His face flushed. “In any case, it’s that ghost girl! Why do you have so many questions? She’s young, about fifteen or sixteen. How many newlyweds who suffered wrongful deaths could there be in such a small town?”

Chu Wanning smiled coldly. “Butterfly Town practices a custom of posthumous marriage. The town harbors at least fifty, if not a hundred, ghost brides, so I really don’t know to which you’re referring.”

“You—!”

Li Wuxin cut in. “How can you address the elder so disrespectfully! How impudent. Hold your tongue!” After dealing his outspoken disciple a sound scolding, Li Wuxin quickly changed tack. He turned to Chu Wanning, his tone now pleasant and agreeable. “Please forgive my disciple, Chu-zongshi. This is his first time leaving the mountain, so he is unacquainted with the rules. The ghost bride of whom he spoke is indeed the girl Luo Xianxian.”

Chu Wanning furrowed his brow slightly. “Luo Xianxian’s resentful spirit went berserk?”

“Indeed,” Li Wuxin sighed. “That ghost girl lost her mind. She

didn't stop at killing every member of the Chen family; she slaughtered the entire town. By the time my disciples and I arrived to seal her, there was barely a soul left alive in the entire settlement."

"How can that be…" Chu Wanning muttered.

"I had heard that the Yuheng Elder of Sisheng Peak was involved in this affair. There's something fishy about this whole business, which is why we came to speak to you. In addition, I obtained two items while at Butterfly Town. Chu-zongshi, please examine them carefully and see if they've aught to do with you."

As he spoke, Li Wuxin retrieved a bloodied yellow silk cloth from his sleeve, intending to hand it to Chu Wanning. But unexpectedly, Xue Meng stepped forward. He blocked Li Wuxin with an irritated *hmph*. "I'll take it!"

"Ah…"

"My shizun is a stickler for cleanliness. He won't touch anything dirtied by the hands of outsiders!"

This was a bit of an exaggeration—Chu Wanning wasn't actually such a stickler, he just preferred not to touch things handled by people he didn't like. But it was true that Chu Wanning couldn't stand Li Wuxin. He said not a word at Xue Meng's meddling, but merely lowered his lashes as he sipped the hot tea Shi Mei brought him.

Powerless, Li Wuxin swallowed his indignation. He could only sneer as he passed the yellow silk into Xue Meng's hands.

Under the flickering candlelight, all eyes were drawn to this scrap of cloth. Chu Wanning shook it open. He took only a glance before his face fell. "The Incantation of Deliverance…"

"That's right. Chu-zongshi, I looked into it and found that you were the one who temporarily sealed the resentful spirit Luo Xianxian. Before you left, you gave a copy of this Incantation of Deliverance to the

only daughter of the Chen family, and told her that the family must copy and recite it once a day for ten years—is that correct?"

"It is."

"The Incantation of Deliverance on this silk is written in Chu-zongshi's hand, is it not?"

A pause. "That is indeed the case."

"But Chu-zongshi—at the end of each passage of this Incantation of Deliverance, there are written extra characters comprising a different spell." Li Wuxin raised his voice. "I trust you know what this is? Sigil of the Returning Billows, a reversal spell! Every time the Chen family copied the Incantation of Deliverance, they would draw this reversal spell symbol, thereby transforming this spell that was meant to put the dead to rest into a spell to cause harm, eroding the seal on Luo Xianxian until she turned into a savage ghost and massacred the town! The Chen family themselves were completely ignorant of the ways of cultivation. Besides the Yuheng Elder, who personally gave them this silk cloth, I cannot think of a second individual who could have taught them to draw such a spell!"

"Watch your tone, old man!" Xue Meng was outraged. "If my shizun wanted them dead, why use such a roundabout method?! What spell, what reversal spell—can't handwriting be forged? You think my shizun drew these characters? Well maybe *I* think it was a certain son of a bastard who added them to frame another, and I'm looking right at him!"

Li Wuxin smiled mirthlessly. "Xue Meng-gongzi, weren't you ever taught not to interrupt the conversations of your elders?"

Xue Zhengyong spoke up. "Li-zhuangzhu, isn't it a bit of a reach to accuse Yuheng based only on this silk cloth? My son is right—handwriting can be imitated. If someone wanted to frame Yuheng, they

could simply copy his spell a few times and learn to match his handwriting."

"Then we must ask," countered Li Wuxin, "does Chu-zongshi have some arch-nemesis who would go to such lengths to harm him?"

Mo Ran, who had stood quietly to the side until now, suddenly barked out a dry laugh.

Li Wuxin looked over at him. He recalled this young man's earlier vulgar talk of 'mortar and pestle' and couldn't help but frown. "What are you laughing at?"

"It's just you're all so busy dreaming up wild speculations, you've overlooked one thing."

"What thing?" Xue Zhengyong asked curiously. "Ran-er, what're you thinking?"

"I'm not all that well-read, but I do happen to know a bit about this Sigil of the Returning Billows, and I also happen to know how to draw it." Mo Ran laughed. "Here, isn't this it?" As he spoke, he gathered a smudge of red spiritual power at the tip of his finger. He leaned lazily against the pillar, and the spiritual power swooped and darted before him. Soon, an expertly rendered Sigil of the Returning Billows shimmered in the air before him, pretty as fireworks.

Xue Meng was shocked. "Why, you mutt, that's amazing! When did you learn to do that?"

Mo Ran laughed. "It's all there in Shizun's books. I thought it looked interesting, so I memorized it." He tapped the luminous red spell, and it rose gradually until it hovered over the heads of all present in the hall. The reversal mark glowed brilliantly, streaming bits of broken sparks. "There now. Go on and compare the spell I drew with the one on the cloth. See if they don't look exactly the same."

The disciples of Sisheng Peak loved a good spectacle. When they

saw Chu Wanning stoically toss that silk cloth onto the table, offering his tacit consent, they all swarmed over without delay, crowding around the bit of cloth to compare the two in detail. The visitors from Bitan Manor stood stiff at first. But after a moment, between their own curiosity and the desire of some to poke holes in Mo Ran's claim, every one of them clustered close as well.

Both sects looked the cloth and the characters over for a good long while, and in the end, came to the same conclusion: the characters Mo Ran had drawn were indistinguishable from the spell on the silk cloth, as if they had been written by the same hand.

Shaken, Li Wuxin's idiot disciple spoke up once again. He pointed at Mo Ran. "Good going! So you confess! *You're* the one who committed the murders!"

Mo Ran eyed him without a word.

"What's your name?" Chu Wanning asked evenly.

"Hm? You're asking *me*?" That dimwitted disciple was first taken aback. Then he straightened his spine, head held high and chest puffed out as he proudly proclaimed, "I am the thirteenth direct disciple of Wuxin, Zhen Congming."

Mo Ran snorted. *Zhen Congming—"very smart"?*

Chu Wanning, on the other hand, barely reacted to Disciple Very Smart—after all, he himself bore a name like Xia Sini, "scare you to death." He said coolly, "Young ones ought to learn to keep their mouths shut when their elders are speaking."

His mockery of Li Wuxin's comment toward Xue Meng earlier was obvious to all, and when Li Wuxin heard, his face flushed the color of pig's liver. He was horribly frustrated, but couldn't think of a comeback, all too aware of the eyes on them. He said with a dissatisfied *hmph*, "Chu-zongshi's disciples certainly are outstanding young men. How

skillful they are, to be able to draw this spell just as a zongshi does."

"It's not just me, Li-zhuangzhu," said Mo Ran. "If you knew how to draw this spell, it'd look the same as mine and Shizun's."

Li Wuxin glared at Mo Ran. "What are you trying to say?!"

Mo Ran laughed. "The strokes of the Sigil of the Returning Billows are highly complex; the level of skill, the heaviness of the stroke, no element can be out of place. That's why it doesn't matter who drew it—it would come out just the same. One's handwriting plays no part. If a drawing is even slightly off, the spell won't work."

"Ridiculous!" The humiliation of being corrected by a junior before a crowd was more than Li Wuxin could abide. All the hairs of his beard stood on end with outrage. "What spell in this world could be so finicky? I don't need to have practiced this spell to know that's utter nonsense. Don't go making things up, you little brat!"

"He's not making it up," Chu Wanning said.

Li Wuxin had reached the limit of his patience. "Chu Wanning," he exclaimed in anger, "you speak without proof! How would you know! How can you know?! The flaws and weaknesses of a spell are largely known only to its creator. Do you dare proclaim yourself the creator of the Sigil of the Returning Billows?!"

Chu Wanning lifted his eyes and considered him stonily. He took another sip of tea before leisurely replying, "Daren't I? Then I'll tell you now."

Li Wuxin stared at him in confusion.

"I created the Sigil of the Returning Billows."

Li Wuxin stared at him in dawning comprehension.

Chapter 92:
This Venerable One Returns to Butterfly Town

THE ENTIRE HALL stood in shock at these words, and the Bitan Manor disciples looked as if they had been struck by lightning.

In the cultivation world, average cultivators memorized spells, superior cultivators understood them, and exceptional cultivators adapted them. But far above the average, the superior, and the exceptional lay still another tier of cultivators—those who had no need for memorization, who had long since understood, and who were unsatisfied with adaptation. Those who had grasped the final step: creation.

These were the masters who refined unique pills and elixirs, the experts who crafted unparalleled arms and armor, the geniuses who drafted unprecedented spells and talismans—those whose skill commanded the title of "zongshi."

To common cultivators, these zongshi were little more than a name on a scroll, or perhaps a seal on a magical treasure. The young disciples from Bitan Manor never imagined that the man they had brazenly attempted to arrest and drag to Tianyin Pavilion for interrogation was one such godlike individual.

Li Wuxin's forehead was covered in a sheen of cold sweat, but as the sect's leader, he had no choice but to put up a bold front and persevere. He squeezed out a smile, his waxy yellow face the color of rice hulls gleaming with grease. "What a coincidence that the Sigil of the Returning Billows was created by Chu-zongshi himself. This one has truly…ah ha ha, *truly* underestimated Chu-zongshi. However, while

confronting the vengeful ghost of Luo Xianxian at Butterfly Town, I obtained yet another item. I wonder if this too might have some relation to Chu-zongshi."

Chu Wanning knitted his brows. "What item?"

Li Wuxin waved his hand, and Disciple Very Smart swiftly brought over a brocade box. "A weapon."

Chu Wanning gazed silently at the box for a spell. "Is it a willow vine?"

This time, everyone's eyes, including Mo Ran's, widened in disbelief.

"H-how did you know…" Li Wuxin's voice shook as he spoke. "Unless it really was you, but…what's going on here?!"

A golden light burst to life in Chu Wanning's palm, lengthening inch by inch until it coiled on the floor. As the glow dimmed, a length of willow vine, its delicate leaves unfurled, materialized before the onlookers. Chu Wanning was unfazed. By now, he was already certain that the incident at Butterfly Town was perpetrated by the same mysterious individual they'd encountered at Jincheng Lake and Peach Blossom Springs. "Li-zhuangzhu, the weapon in the box is this one, is it not?"

"Y-yes." Li Wuxin's voice sputtered and nearly gave out on him.

The brocade box was opened. Inside was indeed a length of willow vine, identical to the one in Chu Wanning's hand in every way.

Chu Wanning narrowed his eyes. His suspicions had already been roused when that fake Jiangui that was used to kill the people of the feathered tribe and frame Mo Ran had appeared at Peach Blossom Springs. This confirmed them. "Li-zhuangzhu, may I have a look?"

Li Wuxin mulled it over. Things weren't exactly going his way

right now, and it'd be inadvisable to offend Chu Wanning further. After a moment's consideration, he said, "Chu-zongshi is too courteous. I'm only here to inquire about the situation in the first place. Please look all you want—why should I ever refuse? I'd be only too thrilled to get your thoughts."

Chang-gongzi, for his part, was rather less than thrilled. He'd come to Sisheng Peak to pick a fight and had spent a small fortune securing Bitan Manor's support. What was this damnable old fart playing at? Was he really going to switch sides after facing a little pushback? Chang-gongzi threw pointed look after pointed look at Li Wuxin, until eventually each one was an angry glare.

Li Wuxin paid him no heed, but Mo Ran noticed those looks from where he stood on the side. "Chang-gongzi," he said mockingly, "are your eyes okay? You seem to be squinting them quite a lot."

Meanwhile, Chu Wanning had taken the willow vine from the box and was now examining it closely. Sure enough, although it was no different from Tianwen and Jiangui in appearance, its life force was exceedingly weak, far weaker than that of a holy weapon with a master. This was clearly a dead thing. "Heart-Pluck Willow…"

Xue Meng had keen ears, and when these words reached them, he froze. "What?"

"This vine, and the ones used to kill the feathered tribe back at Peach Blossom Springs as well—they were all broken off the Heart-Pluck Willow," Chu Wanning replied.

"Ah!" Shi Mei cried out in surprise. "So that's what it is?"

"Before the old dragon passed at Jincheng Lake, he said the fake Gouchen employed a certain spell that required a strong wood elemental spirit to maintain. It's likely that he took some branches from the holy tree before destroying Jincheng Lake. Although their spiritual power

will gradually fade with the death of the holy tree, they should still be sufficient for his purposes for some time."

Chu Wanning's slender fingers traced the golden leaves on the vine in his hand. "Even the branches that have been practically depleted of spiritual power have not gone to waste—he has used them either as false evidence to frame others, or distributed them to his puppeteered pawns as weapons."

As he spoke, a flame kindled to life in his hand. He held that vine that was the mirror image of Tianwen to the fire, and it caught instantly, its blaze reflected in the shocked and stupefied eyes of the onlookers.

"This is not my weapon." Chu Wanning let the fire lick all the way up to the tip of the branch before closing his palm around the flame, extinguishing it. He tossed the scorched willow vine aside and said mildly, "Tianwen is possessed of abundant spiritual energy. Even Samadhi True Fire[2] couldn't hope to burn it, much less an ordinary fire spell such as this."

Li Wuxin opened his mouth, then closed it. But in the end, he refused to back down so easily, and opened it again. "I, too, have heard about this incident at Peach Blossom Springs. Word has it that Sisheng Peak's Mo-gongzi murdered the Great Immortal Lord of the feathered tribe."

"Oi, I didn't kill anyone." Mo Ran raised his hands defensively.

Xue Zhengyong, visibly displeased, was unyielding on this matter. "As I've already explained to the other sects, this was not my nephew's doing. Li-zhuangzhu, the next time you bring it up, I won't be so polite."

His reaction seemed to stir some memory in Mo Ran's mind. He stilled, and a flicker of something indiscernible flashed through those habitually smiling eyes. "Uncle…" he muttered.

“The incident at Peach Blossom Springs was a set-up,” said Chu Wanning. “The situation was chaotic, and I was afforded no opportunity to defend my disciple’s innocence. But, today, since Bitan Manor has come all this way seeking the truth, I will certainly tell you the whole tale.”

In the wavering candlelight of the lamps, Chu Wanning offered a concise summary of the events of Jincheng Lake and Peach Blossom Springs. By the time he finished, the disciples of Bitan Manor were stunned speechless, and Li Wuxin was sweating so profusely that his clothes were soaked through. He dithered for a while, then asked, “Does Chu-zongshi mean to say there’s someone in the world at this very moment who has mastered one of the three forbidden techniques, the Zhenlong Chess Formation?”

“That is correct.”

“But how can that be?! It’s a forbidden technique! E-even the leader of the Rufeng Sect, first in the cultivation world, would be hard-pressed to acquire the scroll for such a thing—”

Chu Wanning cut him off. “I have spoken nothing but the truth. Whether you believe or not is up to you.”

“Impossible.” Li Wuxin insisted, his face pale. He guffawed loudly through trembling lips, as if by doing so he could convince himself this was an unfortunate joke. “If there’s really someone out there who has mastered the Zhenlong Chess Formation, the world will be thrown into disarray. Everything in the upper and lower cultivation realms alike is in danger of being rewritten!”

Ex-Emperor Taxian-jun was a little miffed. “That guy only *knows* it, he hasn’t ‘mastered’ it. If he had, would things still be so peaceful now?”

Li Wuxin's whiskers quivered, and he had just opened his mouth to retort when a sword flashed in through the door. A Bitan disciple, clothes bloody, stumbled off it. The disciple coughed up a mouthful of blood before raising his tear-streaked face to Li Wuxin.

"Zhuangzhu," he cried, "it's terrible! The barrier you erected around Butterfly Town has shattered! Vicious spirits rushed out, and my seniors used their own bodies to block the spirits' escape, but my shixiong…all thirty of them who were guarding the barrier…sacrificed themselves to hold back the ghosts. Only I was left to bring the news…" He drew in deep, shuddering breaths, then raised his voice in a piteous wail. "Zhuangzhu! Hurry—notify all the sects of the upper cultivation realm! Every dead soul in that town is being controlled! It's a forbidden technique! A forbidden technique!"

"What?!" Li Wuxin stumbled backward into a pillar, as pale and haggard as a corpse dumped from its coffin.

"There's no way we can hold them off by ourselves…" The disciple wept miserably, his tears washing the blood from his face. "Zhuangzhu!" He suddenly noticed Xue Zhengyong, and turned to grovel toward him as well. "Xue-zhangmen, I'm begging, please come too! All of my shixiong… I… how can I face them…" He rambled incoherently for a few more seconds, then closed his eyes and howled at the sky in grief. "They're all…they're all *dead*!"

The hall was deathly silent for a beat. Then it burst into an uproar.

Xue Zhengyong was ever level-headed in the face of disaster. He immediately directed Madam Wang to send messages to the remaining eight great sects of the upper cultivation realm, and put Xue Meng in charge of gathering the elders.

"Chu Wanning?" Xue Zhengyong turned to him next.

"There's no time to waste. I'll go first."

“But you don’t know how to ride swords…”

Before Chu Wanning could reply, Mo Ran rushed over, eager to meet this so-called master of Zhenlong Chess Formation. “Don’t worry, Uncle, I’ll take Shizun.”

Chu Wanning cast him a glance but said nothing—silent assent.

The two strode out of the hall side by side. Shi Mei stood frozen in place for a long moment, face pale, before snapping out of it and saying, “M-me too…”

But by the time he ran outside Loyalty Hall, they were gone. Xue Zhengyong called him back and told him not to run off alone. All Shi Mei could do was go after Xue Meng and wait to leave with the second group.

As for Bitan Manor, Li Wuxin had lived his life in luxury—never once had he run into anything as big as this. But the old fart still wanted to save face. He drew in a deep breath to collect himself, then set about giving instructions. He had someone care for the messenger disciple and others contact the elders of his own sect, gathering his forces in hopes of making a good showing at Butterfly Town and thereby regaining some dignity.

The assembly set off from Sisheng Peak in force, rushing across the sky toward Butterfly Town like hundreds of shooting stars. From where Li Wuxin stood on his sword at the head of the fleet as they flew through the clouds, he couldn’t resist stealing a sidelong glance at the disciples of the foremost sect of the lower cultivation realm. Never had he expected to one day march into battle alongside such riffraff, the very people he had looked down upon all his life. For a moment, his feelings were rather complicated. Traveling by swift sword, the group traversed a thousand miles in a blink. Soon the clouds before them parted to reveal a stream of bloody demonic light shooting straight up

toward the sky, and Li Wuxin had no more thought to spare for matters of the upper or lower cultivation realm.

Floating in midair was an enormous, glimmering array of crimson light the length and breadth of the town itself, delineated neatly into the checkered squares of a chessboard. On that chessboard, like so many carved figurines, hovered the silhouettes of the dead townsfolk: five hundred households, over one thousand souls, hanging in the air like a dense forest of human flesh.

Li Wuxin cried out despite himself. “I-it really is…Zhenlong Chess Formation!”

Xue Zhengyong, his expression dark, turned to the Bitan Manor leader. “Li-zhuangzhu, I’ll take my people to the southeast side, but we’ll have to trouble you to handle the northwest. We must hold out till the other sects arrive.”

There were more pressing matters at hand than Xue Zhengyong’s presumptuous use of *we*, so Li Wuxin merely nodded. “Got it, got it.”

Xue Zhengyong cupped his fist in his hand respectfully, then led the disciples of Sisheng Peak out of the clouds to alight on the southeast side of Butterfly Town. The defensive barrier that Bitan Manor’s disciples had bled and died for was nigh on the verge of collapse, the field of its spiritual energy weakening by the minute. Beyond the translucent barrier roamed masses of walking corpses.

“Chu Wanning!” Xue Zhengyong caught sight of a man standing before the barrier in fluttering white robes beside a figure in silver-blue light armor. “What’s the matter?” he called out. “Is the barrier irreparable?”

Chu Wanning had been on the scene for some time. The number one zongshi of barriers was standing right there—Xue Zhengyong couldn’t understand why this one was still in such a sorry state. But his

calls raised no response. Xue Zhengyong was about to try again when Mo Ran turned and gestured for him to be silent. “Uncle, shh. Come over here.”

Xue Zhengyong walked over. “What is it?”

“Don’t disturb him.” Mo Ran pointed at Chu Wanning. Although he stood straight and tall, his eyes were closed and his palms were pressed together before his chest, his lips completely colorless.

Xue Zhengyong started. He reached out to feel for a pulse at the side of Chu Wanning’s neck, then asked in alarm, “Soul Projection?”

“Yeah. It’s all ghosts in there, a couple thousand of them. But we couldn’t find Luo Xianxian, so she’s probably farther into town. We don’t know what’s happening yet, or what that guy is plotting, so he went to ask Luo Xianxian.”

“The girl is already a vicious ghost gone berserk! What’s there to ask!” Xue Zhengyong smacked his own thigh in anger. “Reinforcing the barrier is more important right now!”

“Don’t!” Mo Ran said sharply. “Shizun temporarily cast his soul out using Soul Projection precisely because it’s all dead people in there. This way, he can slip in without alerting the enemy. If we reinforce the barrier now, he’ll be killed!”

“What?!” Xue Zhengyong exclaimed, panicked. “Stay right here and keep an eye on him; I’ll go tell Li Wuxin!”

Mo Ran nodded. “I’ll send up a blue signal as soon as Shizun’s soul returns; then we can start mending the barrier from all directions. But before that, Uncle, you must under no circumstances allow them to mend it. If they do, the thousands of ghosts will go into a frenzy. Shizun is just a bodiless soul in there; he won’t be able to defend himself.”

“I know! I know already!” Before he’d even finished his reply, Xue Zhengyong had already sped away toward Li Wuxin.

Mo Ran raised his eyes to look at that barrier on the brink of failure.

“We’re running out of time.” Mo Ran turned and spoke to him in a low voice. “You must have found Luo Xianxian by now, right, Shizun?” In his worry, Mo Ran reached out without thinking to close his warm hand around Chu Wanning’s ice-cold one. “Just a little longer…”

It was then that Shi Mei touched down nearby with Xue Meng and the rest. When he looked up from the crowd, he was greeted by the unexpected sight of the pair before the barrier, hands entwined. He froze, and the color drained from his face. He bit down on his lip and slowly turned his head away.

Chapter 93:
This Venerable One's Shizun, Who Dares Touch?!

CHU WANNING'S LIVING SOUL roamed inside the barrier.

Wherever he went, he found wandering ghosts and the shadows of lost souls. But the truly peculiar thing was the mangled corpses—the heart of each and every one had been dug out before death. Their chests were empty, some with arteries and pieces of flesh dangling outside the hollow cavity, others with the white bones of their ribcage plainly visible.

Chu Wanning knew something was amiss here. But the defensive barrier around Butterfly Town was growing weaker by the moment, and he could not afford to tarry. He sped toward the Chen Manor.

When he arrived, he found four cauldrons, each half the height of a man, placed outside the Chen Manor in the four cardinal directions. Increasingly dense fumes poured from each cauldron in hues of red, blue, brown, and gold rather than the typical white. Fires were lit under all four cauldrons, and each was filled to the brim with blood. Once he drew closer, Chu Wanning found that beneath the roiling blood were piled masses of red flesh.

Human hearts.

Here were the hearts that had been ripped from the bodies of the deceased—the cauldrons were stuffed full of them.

"Sand Amassed into a Tower…"[3] Chu Wanning muttered to himself. He suddenly understood why, even after searching for many weeks, they had found no track nor trace of that person's pursuit of the spiritual essence. To think that lunatic would go this far!

This so-called Sand Amassed into a Tower was a technique whereby the hearts of hundreds of people possessing the same elemental essence were dug out and collected together. The resultant power, bolstered by the resentment of the dead—while not so strong as that of a true spiritual essence—would still be substantial for a short amount of time. But why Butterfly Town? Why Luo Xianxian…

Chu Wanning stepped into the Chen Manor, its courtyards and halls in disarray and its contents and furnishings strewn across the floor. There he found Landlord and Madam Chen swinging from the ceiling beams, both relieved of their hearts as well. However, unlike the townspeople outside, they had not reanimated, for obvious reasons—both bodies had been shredded to ribbons from the waist down by some savage force, and the mutilated mess no longer bore even a passing resemblance to legs.

Chu Wanning made a circuit through the main hall but did not find Luo Xianxian. He proceeded farther in. Within the Chen family's ancestral shrine room, he spied a bowl of ground meat set before each and every memorial tablet, as if in offering. A closer inspection revealed half an eyeball mixed into the meat, and a segment of a finger…

Feeling bile rise in his throat, Chu Wanning made to leave when a burst of crisp laughter skittered down from above. His eyes snapped up. The white paper lanterns swayed as the candles within flared to life one by one.

Luo Xianxian sat on a ceiling beam, dressed in vivid red wedding robes and dangling a pair of bare feet as delicate as jade. She rocked gently back and forth, cocking her head as she contemplated Chu Wanning. She giggled. "Uh-oh. You found me."

She looked no different from before. But behind that gleeful expression, her soul was nothing like the bashful girl Chu Wanning had

met back then. Her eyes were yet large and round, but they now flickered a demonic crimson—arrogant and unbridled, blazing like a flame.

Luo Xianxian had become a demon.

Tianwen could interrogate a ghost but once, and Chu Wanning had already done so when he'd come to Butterfly Town to exorcise evil the first time; it wouldn't work on her again. All he could do now was suppress the demonic nature within her soul, call back her original consciousness, and attempt to speak to her then.

"Luo Xianxian, why are you here?" As Chu Wanning spoke, the hand hidden in his sleeve was already preparing to unleash a spell.

"Pfft. Because I feel like it," the petite girl spat. "Not that it's any business of yours."

Chu Wanning shook his head, his brows knitted so tight it looked like a scar had been carved between them. "There in the offering bowls…is that Chen Bohuan's younger brother?"

"Oh, him." Luo Xianxian spoke as if she couldn't care less. "Only the row on the left. The row on the right is that little Yao bitch."

Chu Wanning stared at her in shock.

"So many men in the world and she had to steal *my* husband, just 'cause she's the governor's daughter. Getting chopped into mincemeat is no more than she deserves!"

Luo Xianxian was too far gone. Her present temperament bore no resemblance to her manner in life, nor could she recognize the man before her as the "Yanluo-gege" who had once fought to exonerate her.

Upon hearing that Madam Chen-Yao had met the same fate, Chu Wanning's heart sank. "Then…" In a low voice, he pressed on, "the young daughter of the Chens…"

“She was kind to me; I wouldn’t treat her poorly.” Luo Xianxian smiled, her lips a vibrant red, as if painted with blood. She rubbed her belly and said gaily, “That’s why she’s in here. I ate her. Now little sis will always be with me, and no one will bully her.”

“You’ve truly gone mad.” A blinding light burst to life in his palm as he spoke, the flash of golden brilliance illuminating the dark corners of the room in an instant. Luo Xianxian yelped in surprise as Chu Wanning leapt up and flung a curse unerringly onto her forehead. Demonic screeching filled the room.

Chu Wanning wasted no time. In seconds, he had summoned ten golden chains to bind her. He pressed the tips of white and slender fingers to the center of her brow, his eyes flickering with fire and lightning, expression dark as thunderous clouds. His thin, pale lips parted slightly as he wordlessly chanted an incantation.

Luo Xianxian’s eyes bulged, and saliva dripped from the corner of her mouth. Her once-pretty face twisted into terrifying shapes under the power of the chanting. “Shut up! Let me go! Blood for blood! I’ve done nothing wrong!” Chu Wanning paid her no heed, eyes cool and downcast as the light at his fingertips shone brighter and brighter. She began to shriek hysterically. “Let me go! Let me *go*! My head hurts! It hurts! *I can’t take it anymore!*”

She screamed and wailed—then suddenly stopped. A sinister crimson lit her eyes, and the corners of her lips quirked eerily upward. She snickered softly. “Is that what you were hoping to hear?”

Startled, Chu Wanning yanked his hand away and leapt backward, his phoenix eyes widening. There was a flurry of white; he dodged Luo Xianxian’s Soul-Shattering Strike just in time, the silk of his robes settling gently around him as he landed some distance away on the veranda.

Luo Xianxian straightened slowly, her faked agony of seconds ago nowhere to be seen. The Purification Spell hadn't affected her in the least; if anything, she seemed even stronger than before. "Did you really think a measly Purification Spell could do me in?" Luo Xianxian sneered. "I've devoured the life force of more than a thousand people in this town. I'm on the cusp of cultivating a body of flesh. And when I have it, I'll take my husband back from the underworld, and we'll leave this place, never to be parted again. How could I possibly let you ruin it for me when I'm so close?!"

The Luo Xianxian of before was gone; all she knew now was her desire to be forever with Chen Bohuan. An idea occurred to Chu Wanning. In a low voice, he asked "Who told you that you could cultivate a body this way?"

"What's it to you?"

"Whoever it was, he lied," Chu Wanning replied coldly. "Your original body is no more; the only way to acquire another is through the cycle of reincarnation. Achieving rebirth by consuming the life force of a thousand people—there is no such thing. He tricked you into slaughtering the townsfolk so that he could gather their hearts for his own ends."

Luo Xianxian's eyes were wide with shock. "Impossible! He wouldn't lie to me!"

"Who is 'he'?"

"He…he's…" She mumbled over and over. She clutched her head and shrieked, "I don't know! I don't know! I want a body! I want to live! *I don't want to die!* He didn't lie to me…he didn't lie to me… You're the one who's lying… That's right, *you're* the one lying!" With a swirl of red silk, the ghost rushed toward Chu Wanning, claws extended.

Just then, an ominous *boom* thundered from the skies above.

Chu Wanning dodged Luo Xianxian's attack and looked up to discover a long, narrow crack in the defensive barrier, which could no longer stand before the overwhelming resentful energy of the town. The life energy of those outside seeped in through the gap, and all throughout the town came the roars of the undead.

The barrier was about to break. He was out of time. If he didn't recover Luo Xianxian's consciousness soon, he would have no choice but to kill her.

And with her, their last lead…

Outside the barrier, Li Wuxin stared up at the horrifying crack in midair. "Are we still not mending the barrier?!" he yelled at Xue Zhengyong. "We gotta start repairing it! If it breaks and a thousand walking dead rush out at once, there's no way we can hold them all back!"

"Just a little while longer!" Xue Zhengyong was similarly grim, and large droplets of sweat beaded on his forehead. "Don't mend it just yet. Yuheng is still inside. Wait just a little while longer."

Li Wuxin cursed under his breath. His heart beat wildly at the sight of that barrier, cracked like an egg. He snarled, "If the barrier fails, how much blood do you think will be spilled?! How will you answer to the entire cultivation world then?" He whipped around to bellow at his disciples, "Have the calls for aid been sent? When will the other sects arrive?!"

The disciple handling the messages was drenched in nervous sweat. "The other eight great sects all said this is a serious matter that must be reported to their respective sect leaders first and foremost. The sect leaders and elders will have to discuss it before any aid can be sent."

Li Wuxin's face darkened further. "What about Rufeng Sect? Nangong-xianzhang has always been mettlesome. Surely he of all people isn't so spineless."

"Um…" As the disciple searched for words to respond, the communication talisman began to glow once more. He skimmed it quickly and announced, overjoyed: "Rufeng Sect is coming! They just sent word—they're sending people as we speak!"

Sure enough, within ten minutes, a wall of blue clouds appeared on the horizon. As they drew closer, those watching saw that these were not clouds at all, but a drove of nearly a thousand cultivators, each clad in a blue mantle emblazoned with Rufeng Sect's heron and soaring through the sky on swords aligned in strict formation.

At their head were Nangong Si and Ye Wangxi. Nangong Si rode astride his faewolf Naobaijin, a jade bow on his shoulder and a full quiver across his back. He had an imposing air about him, the arrogance and intemperance of youth writ clear on his face. Ye Wangxi was dressed all in black as before. With a cloak embroidered with Rufeng's heron thrown over top, he looked seven parts handsome, three parts beautiful.

"What is this?!" Nangong Si saw the sorry state of the barrier and promptly blew his top. His furious gaze scanned the crowd, skipping right over every person from the lower cultivation realm's Sisheng Peak to land on the only individual remotely fit to be addressed by him: the leader of Bitan Manor. "Li Wuxin! Do you not see that crack in the barrier? What are you doing just standing around down here? Don't you know to mend it?!"

Li Wuxin was Nangong Si's senior by a long shot, but Nangong Si was the sole heir to the foremost sect in the cultivation world. Li Wuxin could only grin and bear it, even as his entire face flushed red at the

admonishment. “Young Master Nangong, I must inform you that the barrier remains in disrepair only at Xue-zhangmen’s insistence.”

And with that, the hot potato was tossed to Xue Zhengyong.

“Sisheng Peak?” Nangong Si glanced at Xue Zhengyong and let out a *hmph*, perhaps of contempt. He waved a hand and turned to his personal attendant. “Go patch up the shitty pot. All this yammering had me thinking it was something serious.”

Ye Wangxi tried to stop him. “Young master—”

But Nangong Si wouldn’t spare him so much as a glance. Even stranger, Song Qiutong had come as well. Her face was obscured behind a veil of white silk and her eyes were downcast, as demure and obedient as ever—but today she stood beside Nangong Si rather than Ye Wangxi.

Rufeng Sect was nothing if not expeditious, and they obeyed none but their own leaders. This was especially true of the personal attendants of Nangong Si; the group of them stepped up in sync, completely ignoring any attempt at explanation, and immediately set about laying down the seals and arrays to mend the barrier.

“Wait!” Xue Zhengyong interrupted four or five people’s attempts in succession, yet when he turned around, another had already formed the mending seal and sent it flying in a streak of blue light toward the crack in the barrier. The blood drained from Xue Zhengyong’s face. “Yuheng!”

There was a sudden *bang,* and sparks flew. In the breath before the seal reached the crack in the barrier, it was cleaved in two by a flash of crimson like a bolt of bloody lightning.

All heads snapped up to see a young man standing on his sword in midair before the barrier, a length of willow vine in his hand.
His features were bright and friendly, as if naturally bathed in warmth—but at this moment, his eyes were sharp and unyielding, his gaze flaring

like the leaves of the vine in his hand, coursing with a light the scarlet of blood and erupting with sparks.

High above them, Mo Ran's brows were drawn low in a frown. "Didn't I fucking say that no one is to touch this barrier?" he asked darkly. "Tell me, are you deaf or stupid?!"

He may have loathed Chu Wanning, but that was between the two of them. Be it in his past life or this one, on pain of death, he would never permit anyone but himself to touch so much as a hair on Chu Wanning's head. He'd said it before—only *he* was allowed to kill the one he hated; the only one allowed to ruin him, to torment him.

In his fit of rage, the savagery of his past life reared its head, bleeding through into his demeanor in a stark departure from his usual attitude of a playful and easy-going young master. Xue Zhengyong, Xue Meng, and even Shi Mei were taken aback, to say nothing of the disciples of Rufeng Sect.

Chapter 94:
This Venerable One Sees the Heavenly Rift Again

A LOOK OF DISPLEASURE crossed Nangong Si's face, his gaze dark like rolling, molten iron. He looked over, and his eyes snagged on the blazing red of Mo Ran's holy weapon before moving on. "Who's that?"

"He's the gongzi from Sisheng Peak, surname Mo," Ye Wangxi replied.

"Mo?" Nangong Si knitted his brows slightly. "The one that was picked up off the streets some years ago?"

"Mn."

Nangong Si cast Ye Wangxi a sidelong glance. "You know him?"

"We resided in the same courtyard at Peach Blossoms Springs."

Nangong Si sneered. There was no telling what he meant by it, but when Ye Wangxi saw his reaction, his quietly handsome face paled, his lashes lowering, and he pursed his lips and fell silent.

"If he's going to keep waiting, then I may as well grant him some face," Nangong Si said. "A master of a holy weapon at such a young age? I gotta see what he's made of."

Mo Ran, however, had no attention to spare for the Rufeng Sect members. He turned back toward the town, his robes whipping in the wind. The barrier had already cracked; there wasn't much time left…

Chu Wanning, are you not done yet?

Luo Xianxian's nails ripped through the silk curtain. The white cloth fluttered, and the plain fabric was shredded into countless pieces

of falling snow.

Chu Wanning sensed a remarkably familiar presence, but he couldn't quite put his finger on it. Finally, his eyes widened. "Tianwen?!" No, it wasn't Tianwen. But as he exchanged blows with her, he felt it—an energy that was incredibly like Tianwen's emanated from her person.

The inner curtains of the sprawling Chen household were like a fine mist, and locked within were a living soul and a vicious ghost. They exchanged a dozen moves. With each blow, the fog in Chu Wanning's mind cleared a little more, until he came to a sudden realization—with this, everything made sense. "Heart-Pluck Willow…"

Luo Xianxian was already dead, her body cremated to ashes. During their first encounter, she'd had to make use of Madam Chen's body to haunt the family. Why, then, was she able to show her true form now?

That mysterious man had taken a withered branch of the Heart-Pluck Willow and fabricated a temporary shell for her soul to inhabit. The boiling hearts of the townsfolk outside, the steaming haze of colored fumes. Metal, water, fire, earth…they were only waiting for wood: Luo Xianxian's body, made from the Heart-Pluck Willow.

What was that man planning?

Had he gone to such trouble only so that Luo Xianxian could regain her flesh body and slaughter her way into the ghost realm to be with Chen Bohuan once more? Who would go to such lengths for her? She had no living relatives, after all.

Relatives… A relative!

A memory stirred in Chu Wanning's mind, and his blood rushed through his veins. He recalled—back when he first met Luo Xianxian, she had told him something. She had a brother who'd gone missing

many years ago… Was it him?

"All in my path shall die!"

Right now, Luo Xianxian had a body of flesh, while Chu Wanning was merely a living soul. While her spiritual powers couldn't compare to his, she was solid and he was air—for the moment, they were evenly matched. In the blink of an eye, her bloodred nails came lunging for his heart. Chu Wanning swiftly dodged to avoid damage to his soul, then flipped his palm and tapped the spot between her brows.

"It's useless. Try it as many times as you like; the purification spell can't harm me!" She laughed savagely, throwing her head back to howl at the heavens. All around them, bands of corpses in Butterfly Town harkened to her cry. "All ye wandering spirits, heed my command! Come ye forth to feast on flesh and slake your thirst with blood!"

Terrifying wails and howls suffused the air. Butterfly Town had sunk into complete pandemonium, and the frenzied, heartless undead came scurrying to the Chen Manor at her summons. The walking corpses poured in like a flood, shrieking and roaring like crashing waves toppling under the howling winds. The blood-curdling cries were like the screams of a battlefield, and all at once, everyone both inside and outside the barrier could hear them with awful clarity.

Outside the barrier, the cultivators stood shaken. Inside, Chu Wanning battled all alone.

There was only his silhouette, his lone soul, a streak of white standing before Luo Xianxian. She laughed in glee, madness and wretchedness flooding the depths of her eyes. But a gentleman is like bamboo, with unbending integrity, and Chu Wanning remained unfazed even in the face of hundreds of ghosts. Only his brows were drawn deeply together, a layer of gloom darkening his eyes. "Luo Xianxian, do you remember what you once told me?"

“Hm?” She hadn’t expected him to ask such a question and was a bit taken aback.

Chu Wanning took advantage of her momentary confusion to leap to the roof of the Chen Manor’s courtyard in a flutter of white robes. His silk boots, pristine and untainted, landed lightly on the edge of the black sandalwood eaves. “You once told me you never wanted to become a vicious ghost. You said you didn’t want to hurt anyone.” As the pitch of his voice dropped, the wind began to rise around them.

Chu Wanning looked up to see corpses swarming toward them from every direction. He knitted his brows slightly and raised his hands, his broad sleeves fluttering in the haunting winds. Between his hands shone a golden glow. “Forgive me.”

At once, thousands of willow vines shot up from the ground.

Gash after gash opened in the earth beneath the flowing rivers of blood and throngs of corpses in Butterfly Town as sturdy willow trees burst through. The vines gleamed a blinding gold, like countless shimmering chains, and bound every fleeing corpse in their tendrils.

Chu Wanning’s eyes were closed, his long hair whipping wildly before a face as cold as snowmelt in a mountain stream. “Tianwen,” he called in a grim voice, “Ten Thousand Coffins.”

His eyes flashed open, blazing like lightning.

Those rows upon rows of golden weeping willows glowed brilliantly, and innumerable branches sprouted and grew in dense numbers, trapping the walking corpses as they roared and struggled. In the next second, a gap creaked open in every willow tree. As the holes widened, the trees dragged the dead into the dark and brutally sealed them within.

Ten Thousand Coffins.

The largest weeping willow of all sprouted from the courtyard of

the Chen's household. Fast as the sharpest arrow, its vines flew after the dodging Luo Xianxian. However, the girl currently had a body made from the Heart-Pluck Willow herself. Heart-Pluck Willow, Tianwen, Jiangui—all branches from the same heavenly tree, brought to the mortal realm by the Exalted Gouchen. Thus the Ten Thousand Coffins of Tianwen couldn't immediately overtake the small and swift shadow of Luo Xianxian.

The gold-embroidered phoenix on her vivid red wedding robes rolled in the turbulent winds as the giant willow darted after her, pulling itself from the ground, up and up, breaking through the barrier and stretching toward the skies above.

On the other side of the barrier, the crowd was shocked into silence by this sky-shattering tree. Those with lesser spiritual power couldn't endure it; their legs went weak at the zongshi's oppressive presence, and they fell heavily to their knees.

The willow tree formed from Tianwen's spiritual energy grew taller and taller, until it seemed it would reach even the luminous moon itself. Chu Wanning had unleashed his spiritual powers to a degree hitherto unseen. Among the cultivators surrounding Butterfly Town, there were many whose eyes were bloodshot, and even Nangong Si, with all his cultivation, found it difficult to breathe, his chest tight and his heart beating rapidly. He gritted his teeth. "A character like this exists at Sisheng Peak? Who is this Yuheng Elder?"

Next to him, Li Wuxin remained unruffled; he was the head of a sect, after all; he could handle this much. "Nangong-gongzi, this man is Chu Wanning, I tell you!"

"What?!" This startling news, on top of the already intense spiritual pressure, was too much. Nangong Si choked and spat out a

mouthful of blood. “It’s…Chu-zongshi?”

“Young master, please don’t speak anymore.” Seeing that he was hurt, Ye Wangxi raised a hand and pressed two meridian points on Nangong Si’s body to help him circulate his spiritual powers. Yet unexpectedly, Nangong Si wasn’t grateful in the slightest. He pushed Ye Wangxi roughly away and wiped the blood from his lips. “Don’t touch me.”

Ye Wangxi fell silent.

“Ye-gongzi, allow me.” Song Qiutong nominated herself in a small voice.

Being a Butterfly-Boned Beauty Feast, she wasn't greatly affected. She stepped forward gracefully, her lovely eyes delicate and fearful as she gazed at Ye Wangxi.

Yet this time, Ye Wangxi didn't seem so friendly as he had been when they'd first met—he completely ignored her.

Having received the cold shoulder, Song Qiutong turned to gaze at Nangong Si with tear-filled eyes. Nangong Si's attitude toward her was much improved compared to their first encounter, but he, too, declined. "Your help isn't needed. I was merely shocked to hear of someone I haven't seen in many years. I'm not that weak. If you have free time, go help others."

From where he stood, Mo Ran didn't notice at all this exchange between Song Qiutong and the two gongzi of the Rufeng Sect. He'd dropped down beside Chu Wanning's vacant body, lifting his head to watch Chu Wanning's living soul engaged in the heat of battle with Luo Xianxian within the barrier. He looked at that army of corpses temporarily sealed by thousands of willow trees, his heart and mind surging with alarm and anxiety.

To use a spell like this, even under normal circumstances, would exhaust one's spiritual powers—and moreover, Chu Wanning's soul was currently outside his body. Just how ridiculously powerful was this man…

Before Mo Ran could finish the thought, an ear-splitting cry rent the air.

In the end, the Heart-Pluck Willow was no match for Tianwen. Beneath the lonely moon, Luo Xianxian was bound by the willow vines, branches and leaves sprouting fast and swallowing her rapidly. That colossal, sky-scraping tree enveloped her completely within in its trunk. Finally, the ancient willow that had touched the clouds shrank slowly

toward the ground, gradually descending until it stood equal once more with the other willows.

By now the barrier had been completely shattered. But since the Ten Thousand Coffins conjured by Tianwen still held the scores of walking corpses hostage, the danger was still held at bay.

Even so, Xue Zhengyong didn't dare relax his guard and ordered Sisheng Peak's people to stand sentinel before every willow tree. As for the others, they dashed straight for the courtyard of the Chen Manor. In such a dire situation, Mo Ran didn't think twice; he immediately swept up Chu Wanning's cold body into his arms and rushed over with the rest.

When the group arrived, the ancient willow chaining Luo Xianxian had transformed into a coffin. The girl lay within, her expression fluctuating between savagery and sorrow, her eyes sometimes vicious, sometimes aggrieved. Two distinct voices spilled from her lips, switching from one to the other. The first was full of madness as it raged, "Why do you obstruct me! Why do you obstruct me! You all deserve death! Every last one of you!" The other voice was soft and helpless: "Yanluo-gege, is it you…is it you who's come? Please, I beg you, save me… I don't want to hurt people. Please…" The two voices rose and fell, back and forth, until after a long while, silence reigned within the coffin.

At this point, the spiritual power of Chu Wanning's living soul was at its limit; he was barely holding on. Yet, relying on his will alone, he pressed his fingers between the brows of the girl in the coffin. "Speak thy name."

The ghost girl slowly opened her eyes; they were still that violent red.

“Watch out!” Li Wuxin blurted. Just as he was about to charge forward and end the maiden’s life, Chu Wanning pointed a finger and a bolt of lightning cracked down in Li Wuxin’s path, stopping him in his tracks.

“Chu Wanning, you—!”

Chu Wanning ignored him. His eyes were locked on the delicate girl as she haltingly sat up in the willow coffin. No trace of killing intent lay in her bloodred eyes. Instead, they were full of panic and loss as she answered softly, “I am Luo Xianxian.”

When Chu Wanning heard her answer, he finally breathed a sigh of relief. His lashes fluttered closed as the projection of his living soul faded. A moment later, the man in Mo Ran’s arms twitched gently. Mo Ran quickly set him down, propping him against a pillar in the courtyard. He got down on one knee, bringing himself to Chu Wanning’s level. “Shizun, are you back?”

Chu Wanning’s phoenix eyes were dazed, and it was several seconds before they regained their focus. He glanced at Mo Ran. Chu Wanning had depleted his spiritual powers too greatly. He was a man with a weak spiritual core to begin with, and he now appeared somewhat frail, his face no less pale than when his soul had walked free from his body.

“Mn…” Chu Wanning responded. He leaned against the pillar for a spell, then rose gingerly to his feet, using the pillar for support. With slow steps, he came before Luo Xianxian and lowered his gaze to look at her.

Luo Xianxian’s small mouth parted slightly as she stared at him in shock. “Yanluo-gege…Why am I here? W-what happened?”

“First things first.” Chu Wanning’s body was weak, but his eyes were still bright and sharp. He cut straight to the heart of the matter:

“Tell me, who was it that fabricated your body? Do you remember? It’s extremely important.”

“I…”

Chu Wanning waited tensely, his nails near cracking with how hard he was digging them into the stone pillar.

“I can’t remember very clearly, but I have some impressions…” Luo Xianxian mumbled. “It was a man, he…he…”

Next to them, Xue Meng was getting impatient. “Think harder!”

Luo Xianxian wracked her brain, digging through her memories. “At the time, everything was hazy; I didn’t see his face clearly. But I heard his voice; he had a bit of a northern accent… I think… Maybe… Ah!” she cried out. Terror filled her face. “I remember now! It’s him! It’s him! The tangerines! *The tangerine thief!*”

“The tangerine what?” Xue Meng grumbled. “What nonsense…”

However, Chu Wanning understood at once: she meant that madman she had encountered as a little girl, the one who chopped down the tangerine tree!

There was a man from Linyi whose heart died at twenty.

Who was it…

Linyi. It couldn’t be Rufeng Sect, could it? Was it—

Right then, a crisp clap of thunder exploded across the heavens, and the Zhenlong Chess Formation that spanned the sky over Butterfly Town flashed red.

“Not good!” Xue Zhengyong shouted. “Everyone, keep watch on the Ten Thousand Coffins! The creator of the formation has probably noticed we’re here by now—something’s coming!”

Sand flew and debris scattered, and smoke and dust began to rise from all around. Every cultivator in Butterfly Town was on high alert,

their backs pressed against one another and their long swords held before them.

Chu Wanning's eyes darkened, and he turned to Luo Xianxian. "Get up! That man left a white chess piece inside your body. Don't let him control you any longer. I'll help you purge it. Once the white piece falls, leave immediately. Go to the underworld and return to the cycle of reincarnation. You must not linger in the mortal realm!" As he spoke, light gathered in his palm, and he clapped it to Luo Xianxian's chest. But as the spiritual energy passed through her, there was no sign of any white piece from the Zhenlong Chess Formation.

Chu Wanning froze. A chill rushed up his spine, like the quick flash of a spark—he sensed danger. "Go, quickly!" he shouted.

But it was too late. A sharp scream tore through the air.

The heart of the Zhenlong Chess Formation in the sky above glowed with a bloody red light and struck like lightning right into Luo Xianxian's willow-crafted body. The ground rumbled, and fiery light roared to the skies.

"Luo Xianxian!"

The girl's silhouette rapidly contorted in the sea of fire, and in a split second, a wisp of a fragrant soul rose to the skies and mixed with the burning, miasmic fumes. The soul mingled with the fumes into a single entity. Where Luo Xianxian once stood, a stream of jade-green light now shot toward the heavens.

"A spiritual essence of wood?!" The blood drained from Chu Wanning's face, and his eyes flashed with hostility. He'd been thinking about this all wrong—he'd been thinking about this whole thing the wrong way!

While alive, Luo Xianxian must've been someone who possessed great wood elemental spiritual energy. The villain behind the scenes

wasn't making an offering of the metal, fire, water, and earth elements to the wood elemental Heart-Pluck Willow. Rather, he was waiting for the enormous miasma of resentment to coalesce into that crash of thunder and strike Luo Xianxian's body, transforming her resentful spirit into an energy source for what was left of the Heart-Pluck Willow.

Metal, wood, water, fire, earth. All five elements were now assembled. This person had everything they needed…

Chu Wanning lifted his head and looked to the sky. Everyone was looking at the sky. Everything stopped; it was horribly, terrifyingly still.

Suddenly, the earth began to quake.

It was all too like what he and Mo Ran had seen in the ancient city of Lin'an, in the illusion at Peach Blossoms Springs. Above Butterfly Town, a titanic purple-black rift rent the night sky. Within, they beheld endless, bloody chaos, death, pestilence, hatred, as if the eye of the devil himself slowly opened before them.

Li Wuxin pointed at the rift. "The Infinite Hells!" he cried, voice trembling. "The barrier to the Infinite Hells—i-it's broken! The firmament over Butterfly Town is torn; the door to the ghost realm is open!"

Chapter 95:
This Venerable One's Calamity from His Past Life

THAT THIN BOUNDARY separating the world of the yin from that of the yang was far from the sturdy barrier it had been in ancient times. Occasional tears and gaps were such a common occurrence these days that they barely registered alarm within the cultivation world.

But now, a bloody eye had ripped straight across the heavens, bathing the sky and earth alike in an unnatural, eerie hue as debris whipped through the air.

A once-in-a-generation calamity: the Heavenly Rift.

None present, save Mo Ran, had ever personally witnessed such an immense catastrophe. Be it the white-haired Li Wuxin, the battle-seasoned Xue Zhengyong, the upper cultivation realm's Rufeng Sect, or the lower cultivation realm's Sisheng Peak, every one of the thousand-some people gathered before Butterfly Town were aghast, without any idea what to do.

Mo Ran felt like he had been struck by lightning. The thick stench of blood from his past life washed over him, the ruthless massacre, the endless spilling of blood—this was it! That very same Heavenly Rift!

In his previous lifetime, this was where Shi Mei died. He and Chu Wanning had worked together to repair the barrier. But his limited spiritual energy had made him vulnerable, and he was attacked by the masses of ghosts and demons pouring from the rift, and fell from such a height…

But that wasn't supposed to happen yet, not for another three years!

Mo Ran remembered that snowy night with such clarity. It had been just after New Year's Eve. Scraps of red from spent firecrackers had littered the snowy ground, and the faint smell of smoke lingered in the air. He had celebrated the New Year with everyone else the night before, indulging in the tusu wine[4] reserved for the occasion.

Mo Ran looked up, slightly tipsy. In the warm glow of the candlelight, Shi Mei's eyes were like the waters of spring, tender and affectionate from every angle.

Sisheng Peak was alive with laughter and merriment. He had thought, back then, that this was wonderful. That even if he never ended up acting on his feelings toward the person he liked, he'd be content to stay by his side for a lifetime and watch over him from a distance, just like this.

The festivities came to a close, and the disciples drifted back to their quarters. He and Shi Mei left Mengpo Hall together, their path lit by the moonlight reflected on the snowy ground. Shi Mei looked a little cold, so Mo Ran shrugged off his outer robe and draped it over his shoulders without a word. Emboldened by the alcohol coursing through his blood, he snuck a few more glances than usual.

Beauty like new-fallen snow, pure and untouchable.

"A-Ran."

"Hm?"

"You drank a little too much today."

"Did I? Ha ha…" The rest of Mo Ran's laughter died in his throat. Shi Mei had cupped his face with chilly hands, making his already warm cheeks burn hotter. Mo Ran's eyes opened wide, and a tremor ran through his body.

“Mhm,” Shi Mei said with a smile. “Look at you, three cups and your face is all red.”

“I-it’s just kinda hot.” Mo Ran scratched his head goofily, his face aflame.

He had been so easily satisfied back then. Simply liking someone was enough. He didn’t need his feelings returned, didn’t dare to dream of more. That person had merely touched his face, yet he felt like he had been blessed by the heavens. He stared in a daze, words abandoning him, his inky black eyes glistening with wonder and gratitude.

The two bid each other goodnight before the disciple quarters. Before leaving, Shi Mei turned to smile at him, draped in Mo Ran’s robe and backlit by the enchanting glow of moonlight on snow. “A-Ran.”

Mo Ran had already turned to leave, but at the sound of his name, he whipped around in a fluster like a spinning top for fear of missing something. “Y-yes!”

“Thanks for lending me your robe.”

“It’s nothing! I was hot anyway!”

“And,” Shi Mei’s gaze grew even softer, so warm it seemed it could chase away the long winter. “A-Ran, actually, I…”

A firework exploded in the distance.

Mo Ran didn’t catch what he said; or perhaps Shi Mei didn’t actually say anything more. By the time it was again quiet, Shi Mei was already pushing open the door to his room.

“Wait!” Mo Ran called out, panicked. “What did you say just now?”

Shi Mei was uncharacteristically playful, blinking his eyes as he teased, “Good things can only be said once.”

“Shi Mei—”

But that alluring person did not relent. Only the lower half of his elegant face was visible beneath the cold-proofing curtain, bearing a soft smile that Mo Ran would remember for the rest of his life. “It’s late,” he said. “I’m going to bed. If I still feel like telling you in the morning…” Shi Mei paused, soft lashes drooping like feathery mimosa leaves. “I’ll tell you then.”

Who could have known morning would bring with it the Heavenly Rift? In the end, Mo Ran never got to hear the rest, and the most tender dream of his life was dyed a bloody scarlet.

How many times had he dreamt of that smile on Shi Mei’s face beyond the half-raised curtain, of its beauty and gentleness? Perhaps he’d only imagined it, but he’d felt that smile had held boundless feelings.

Time and again, over the course of his painful life, he dreamt the rest of that dream. In his dream, Shi Mei would say that he liked him. Mo Ran would wake up grinning, happy, so happy that for a moment he would forget Shi Mei was dead, that there was no turning back.

Still grinning happily, he would contemplate the rest of their lives together, contemplate what delicious foods he would make for his beloved—such important matters were worth putting some thought into, after all. But then, grinning and grinning, tears would start to roll. He would bury his face in his hands. He would never hear the words that had scattered into the wind on that snowy New Year’s Eve.

Ripping through thousands of miles of heavy clouds, the Infinite Hells yawned open. Evil spirits and demonic fiends, countless in number, poured from the rift like a legion marching to besiege a city. The screams from all around jolted Mo Ran from his memories. Nearly crazed, he pushed through the chaotic, surging crowd, shouting

frantically, beside himself with panic, searching—

"Shi Mei! Shi Mei! Shi Mingjing! Where are you? Where are you?!"

I don't know why the Heavenly Rift came three years early. I don't know if I can protect you with the strength I have now. I can't bear to see you hurt again, can't bear to watch you die again…

Please live…

It's my fault. I should have gotten stronger so I could protect you right away—I was stupid. I didn't think things through, didn't consider that this might happen. Where are you…

"A-Ran…" Between the clashing of weapons, he heard a faint voice.

"Shi Mei!"

There he was, next to Xue Meng, shielding the pair of them against the onslaught of evil spirits with a screen of flowing water. Mo Ran hurtled toward him, heedless of all else, his throat tight and his eyes stinging.

"You damn mutt! Get over here already and help!" Xue Meng fought with the might of ten men, but the waves of corpses were a ceaseless tide. Beads of sweat stood out on his forehead as he said through gritted teeth, "Hurry up!"

He didn't need to say any more. Mo Ran leapt into the air with a flash of red as Jiangui answered his summons. He brandished the willow vine, and the holy weapon annihilated an entire row of the vicious ghosts in a single lash, transforming them to dust in an instant. Mo Ran turned his head to yell in Shi Mei's direction, "Stay close, get behind me!"

"I want to go help Shizun…"

"Don't move!" The words struck unadulterated fear into Mo Ran's

heart. Under no circumstances would he allow Shi Mei anywhere near Chu Wanning in this battle. Not this time. Memories from his past life overlaid and bled into the scene before him. Back then, he had said the same thing:

"I want to go help Shizun."

"All right, go quick. You'll be safer over there with Shizun. Stay close and let him protect you."

Let him protect you. How absurd. Chu Wanning, Chu Wanning… Mo Ran had planned and calculated for every possibility, but he had forgotten to consider that this person was *Chu Wanning*! Cold-blooded and heartless. Head full of "the common people," but not a whit of care for his own dying disciple.

"Don't go over there! He can take care of himself!" Mo Ran's head felt numb from the overlapping vision of two lifetimes. Eyes bloodshot, he roared at Shi Mei, "Don't move! Stay right here!"

"But Shizun expended so much of his strength just now…"

"He'll live! Worry about yourself!" Mo Ran scowled darkly and directed another powerful lash at the surging waves of undead, sending flesh and blood flying and clumps of brain matter splattering to the ground. His current level of spiritual power was a far cry from the heights he'd achieved in his past life, but the forms and movements came to him like second nature. After all, his body had seen countless battles and had crossed blades with the likes of Ye Wangxi and Chu Wanning. He fought fearlessly, undaunted in the face of the savage undead in their millions.

The rift in the sky grew.

The fiends that had been confined within the Infinite Hells for centuries poured into the mortal realm in a violent deluge. They mixed with the walking corpses of Butterfly Town that had taken advantage of

the strength afforded them by the sudden influx of yin energy to struggle free of Chu Wanning's willow vines.

The situation grew increasingly terrifying, increasingly out of control, frantic as a pot of boiling oil doused with water. The ghosts and demons snatched living people and tore into them like a swarm of locusts descending on a field of crops. Demonic encounters were routine business for those from Sisheng Peak; they could hold their own. But the same could not be said of Rufeng Sect and Bitan Manor. One after another, their cultivators screamed and their blood splashed into the air.

Chu Wanning was too far away for Mo Ran to see how he fared, but he caught sight of Ye Wangxi and Nangong Si among the throngs of people. For all the two were at odds, their fighting styles were strikingly similar. He saw Ye Wangxi toss aside his sword to summon a long bow in a flash of blue light, while Nangong Si's bow was like the arc of the crescent moon in his hand. The two exchanged a glance before dashing past one another to cover one side each, aiming at the densest masses of undead corpses and drawing their bows to the fullest. They let fly at practically the same instant, the white of the arrows' fletching cleaving through the skies with a sound like the screeching of birds. The arrows were tempered with spiritual power, encased in blades of cutting wind that sliced through the air and ripped through every fiend in their path.

Looking rather pleased with himself, Nangong Si reached back for another arrow, but the quiver at his back was empty. "I'm out?"

"Here." Before his temper could begin to spark, Ye Wangxi had already tossed him another bundle of arrows. "You never bring enough."

"Hmph!" Nangong Si scoffed, but this was hardly the time to be stubborn for the sake of appearances. He accepted the arrows, and the two returned to their respective battles.

An hour passed in the blink of an eye. Though the cultivators beat

back hordes of vicious fiends, still more flooded from the ghost realm to replace them. Li Wuxin cut down a dozen spirits in one slash, then turned to yell at Xue Zhengyong, “We can’t keep on like this, we have to fix the barrier!”

Xue Zhengyong glanced at the four golden arrays glowing in the distance, positioned at each of the town’s four cardinal points. He huffed out a breath and snapped back, cross, “Easy for you to say—do you know how to fix *this* barrier? Do you even have anyone who knows a thing about barriers?”

“I…” Li Wuxin’s face was sullen. “Barriers aren’t one of my sect’s specialties.”

“Then shut the fuck up! How many Yuhengs do you think there are? Chu Wanning is holding down the four critical points right now, and if he lets up, those damn ghosts will rush the blockade and everyone in Sichuan will be a goner! If we cultivators can barely hold on, how do you expect the common folk to survive?!”

“Better that Sichuan be done for than the entire cultivation world! If you don’t find someone to mend the Heavenly Rift right now, we won’t be able to anymore!”

Xue Zhengyong’s temper flared at these words, and when he next swung his metal fan to send a powerful gale hurtling toward the vicious ghosts, he allowed it—as if by accident—to open a slice across Li Wuxin’s cheek. “And why should the people of the lower cultivation realm die for the sake of your precious upper cultivation realm’s safety?”

“Don’t put words in my mouth! I’m saying that sacrifices must be made for the greater good! If this Heavenly Rift had opened at my Bitan Manor, I would’ve gladly sacrificed my entire sect to keep the peace in the land!”

“What a thing to say, Li-zhuangzhu. But talk is cheap.” Xue Zhengyong, his tiger eyes round with fury, was so angry he could only laugh. “The entrance to the ghost realm lies in my province. It is not and will never be in your Bitan Manor, no matter how many generations pass! So, what, the entirety of Sisheng Peak ought to sacrifice itself a thousand times, a million times, for ‘peace in the land’?! Li-zhuangzhu, you really are something!”

The two were locked in a stalemate, bickering as they fended off demons and fiends, when a streak of snow-white brilliance swept toward them from the western horizon.

Before they could ascertain whether it was friend or foe, a burst of frenzied melody descended from the clouds like a tempest, as sonorous and resonant as a deluge from the heavens—yet also like a shower of arrows. For though they spied no weapons, they felt as if the glint of blades was all around them, as if they could hear the braying of warhorses and see fire beacons lit along the walls of a distant stronghold.

“Kunlun Taxue Palace!”

Xue Zhengyong’s head snapped up to gaze at the stretch of snowy radiance. At this distance, he could see that it was indeed a multitude of cultivators riding on swords, each clad in robes of frozen mist silk with peach blossom petals drifting around them. The men and women alike had faces beautiful and gentle, their outward appearances frozen in their early twenties by virtue of their method of cultivation.

Some of the Taxue Palace disciples stood on their swords. Others sat, half of them cradling pipas in their arms and half balancing guqins on their knees. Their chords streamed down from the sky above, tumultuous and frenetic yet clear and flowing, and the spirits and undead below shrieked in agony even as they were held in place, as if

trapped under an invisible net.

The man leading the formation had striking features, with pale gold hair and jade-green eyes. He was clothed in silken robes the white of fresh snow with a pendant resting on his forehead like a droplet of water. Within the collars of those robes, his neck was fair and slender, like a fragrant, delicate blossom in a porcelain vase. Kunlun was a snowy, frigid land, and the fox fur draped over his shoulders atop those silken robes only added to his aura of poise and elegance.

He held an exquisite pipa in his arms, and his brow was furrowed as he plucked its strings with slender fingers, luminescent petals of peach blossoms dancing about him with every note. “Imperial winds across four seas, waters of virtue ever clear; don not the livery of war, for today we emerge in triumph.”

The chords slowed, and he glanced down at Xue Zhengyong and company. Yet just as the man was about to speak, an irate holler rang out from a short distance away.

“Mei Hanxue! You damn mutt! Why is it *you* of all people!”

The voice belonged to Xue Meng, who had darted over to stand under Mei Hanxue’s sword as he yelled and who now tilted his head back to curse, “Of all the people in the world, Kunlun Taxue Palace sent *your* unreliable ass?!”

Ye Wangxi turned toward the commotion, equally irritated by the sight of that man with his pipa and his flittering flower petals and snowflakes. “They sent *him*?”

“What,” Nangong Si asked, “another acquaintance of yours?”

“I wouldn’t call him an acquaintance.” Ye Wangxi was himself less than pleased to encounter Mei Hanxue, but unlike Xue Meng, who had stomped over to cuss him out, Ye Wangxi turned on his heel to leave immediately. “Just fought him once.”

“Oh?” Nangong Si’s curiosity was piqued. “How is he? Any good?”

“Heh.” Ye Wangxi sneered coldly. “He had women do all the fighting for him—how do *you* think he is?”

Nangong Si stared, speechless.

Chapter 96:
This Venerable One's Hatred Born in This Life

IT WAS HARDLY SURPRISING that Ye Wangxi despised Mei Hanxue. This man was none other than that "da-shixiong" from Peach Blossom Springs who'd had innumerable female cultivators cooing over him and squabbling jealously for his attention.

Nangong Si had initially assumed that this new arrival was some powerful character, but he turned out to be a pretty boy who relied on his looks. His initial interest vaporized in an instant, and he turned back to the battle at hand.

Mei Hanxue glanced at Xue Meng, a flicker of exasperation in his gaze, but did not deign to respond. His brows dipped and his fingers danced over the strings of the pipa. At the sound of his notes, the hundred cultivators of Taxue Palace spread out in all directions. "Guqin division, play the Song of Alkaid;[5] pipa division, perform the Nullification Dance."

On his command, the ensemble changed its tune. A cascade of chords, played strong and fast, blended into a resounding refrain that scattered the clouds. Immediately, the hordes of demonic fiends ceased their fighting and stood in place with necks outstretched and hollow stares on their ghastly faces.

Seeing this, Li Wuxin was reminded that those of Kunlun Taxue Palace were not only masters of music, but also knew something of barrier-mending. He tilted his head up and yelled, delighted, "Honored nephew[6] Mei, would you happen to know how to mend the Heavenly Rift?"

Mei Hanxue ignored that distasteful address of honored nephew and answered, “The Heavenly Rift of the Infinite Hells is beyond my abilities.”

“Ah, then…” Li Wuxin’s face paled, then he swept his sleeve and sighed gustily.

“Hanxue, what about the barrier around Butterfly Town—would you be able to hold that down?” Xue Zhengyong spoke up.

Sisheng Peak and Taxue Palace had always been on friendly terms, and Mei Hanxue, seeing a familiar senior, bowed courteously. “I can try.”

“Great!” Xue Zhengyong slapped his hands together. “You go guard the barrier at the cardinal directions, make sure the demons don’t escape, and call Yuheng back—”

“The Yuheng Elder?”

“Ah, my damn memory, I forgot you’ve never met Yuheng. Don’t worry; you’ll know him when you see him. Just look for the person maintaining the barrier right now.”

“Understood.” Mei Hanxue, cool and collected, sailed off toward the outskirts of the town with a tilt of his sword, like a shooting star upon the wind.

Nangong Si nocked three arrows onto his bow and loosed them in three directions at once. Amidst the thrumming of the bowstring, he saw Mei Hanxue shoot past with speed and grace as the rest of the disciples from Taxue Palace suppressed the enemy with mellifluous chords. He was surprised despite himself. “This person seems quite capable after all,” he said to Ye Wangxi. “Why did you call him a pretty boy who relies on women to fight his battles?”

Ye Wangxi, somewhat baffled himself, had no immediate answer. But the fiends were moving sluggishly now, presenting an ideal

opportunity to destroy them, so he didn't waste time thinking about it. "Perhaps he didn't go all out against me back then," he offered, then turned back to the enemy and said no more.

With four of the ten great sects now on the scene, the fight against the Heavenly Rift became somewhat less desperate. But the battle was still a harrowing one.

Although the fiends presently on the ground were immobilized by the chords of Taxue Palace, more oozed, shrieking and howling, from that bloody eye linked to the ghost realm with each passing minute. The force from Taxue Palace had taken up position in midair, but they couldn't defend themselves while playing. Thus the demonic fiends rushed toward the pipa and guqin players where they hung between the clouds.

The Taxue Palace disciples had no choice but to divert some of their number to play a song of defense. The song of suppression and exorcism weakened at once, and the masses of fiends on the ground resumed their furious rampage. Worse still, as the portal to the ghost realm yawned wider, several high-level demons consumed enough yang energy from the mortal realm to cast off their fetters and cross the rift, dragging their chains and shackles behind them.

These creatures were nothing like the minor fiends that preceded them. They were possessed of both their corpses and resentful souls, and were far more powerful and vicious, well beyond the scope of what an average cultivator could handle alone. In an instant, some hapless stragglers were slammed to the ground in a single strike, their chests pierced through by bony claws.

Blood splattered across the ground with a wet squelch as the high-level demons ripped out those cultivators' hearts, rich with spiritual energy. The fiends bit greedily into them, red blood gushing out and

streaming down the rotting flesh of their faces. Soon their mouths were bloody and dangling with gore, and the demons grew ever stronger, plunging into the crowd and seeking their next meal like beasts of prey.

All hell broke loose.

"Set arrays and form groups!" Xue Zhengyong shouted. "Stay together! Don't run off!"

But some of the cultivators were already overcome by fear, running around in hysterics, screaming and crying as they fled in all directions. The stench of blood grew thick in the air; the demonic fiends swept forward like the tide, and the corpses of the dead piled high.

Nangong Si was fully engaged in combat, letting fly arrow after arrow, when a hanged ghost, its bloodred tongue dangling from its mouth, rushed forward and latched onto him. It raised its claw, aiming straight for his chest. When Ye Wangxi turned and saw, the color drained instantly from his usually composed face. He was too far away —"A-Si!"

"Gongzi!" In the nick of time, Song Qiutong sprang forward with her sword and stabbed the hanged ghost in the arm. But she'd never killed a person before, much less a ghastly fiend like this. Fear overtook her, and the long sword fell from her hand and clattered to the ground.

The hanged ghost lunged at her in fury. Nangong Si traded bow for sword as he stepped before her to block its attack. "Get away from here, hurry!"

Song Qiutong's eyes glistened with tears. "Qiutong's life was saved by Rufeng Sect. This one cannot possibly leave…"

Nangong Si had little experience with women. But when he saw her delicate demeanor and the determination in her eyes, he felt as if his heart was being squeezed. He cursed under his breath. "Ye Wangxi! Ye Wangxi—get the hell over here! Look after her for me!"

Ye Wangxi was spattered with blood, his handsome face stained with grime and filth. He clapped a hand around Song Qiutong's arm and said harshly, "Go find Qin-shixiong and stick with him."

"I'm not leaving! I can still help!" she pleaded. "Young masters, I want to stay with you."

"Ye Wangxi, make sure you protect her!"

Ye Wangxi's face darkened; upstanding gentleman that he was, he rarely displayed such anger. "Nangong Si." The syllables of that name came out trembling, broken. "You must have lost your mind." Then, turning his back on the other two, he took up his sword and vaulted away, back into the surging masses of undead.

High-level demons continued to emerge, and they cut through the crowd like daggers slicing open the stomach of a fish and peeling off its scales—glistening and sticky with blood, rising and falling.

It was every man for himself as the fiends surrounded the living—these creatures wanted nothing more than to devour each and every one of them and drag them into the Infinite Hells. Mo Ran, Xue Meng, and Shi Mei fought back-to-back against demons on all sides, but the space they had cleared around them shrank rapidly as the enemy pressed in. There was a wet sound as Xue Meng sheared the arms off a fierce fiend, and its foul blood fountained several feet into the air.

The fiends assailing them saw at once that Xue Meng was a threat, and circled around toward Shi Mei instead. Shi Mei's hands formed a spell sign, but his spiritual energy was being rapidly depleted, and the brightness of the waterlight array before him flickered.

At this rate, Mo Ran knew they wouldn't be able to hold out much longer. He made up his mind. "Shi Mei, put up a shield array. Xue Meng, get in."

"What?" Xue Meng was immediately incensed. "You're telling me

to be a wuss?!"

"Just listen to me and get in! This isn't the time to worry what you look like! Look around—you think we can kill this many ghosts?!"

"A-Ran," said Shi Mei, "what are you going to do?"

"Stop asking questions, just do as I said," Mo Ran softened his tone. "It'll be all right."

The clearing around them contracted further. "Quickly," Mo Ran urged, "there's no more time."

Shi Mei had little choice; he adjusted his hand seal to raise a layer of blue shield array around Xue Meng and himself. When he saw the array was complete, Mo Ran unsheathed the dart concealed in his sleeve and slashed it across his palm, then sprinkled the array with his own blood to mark it with his spiritual energy. His gaze dark, he called out in a low voice, "Get to work!"

Jiangui flared bright at his words. The weapon grew in length by tens of feet, each leaf like a sharp dagger hanging from the willow vine as it blazed with scarlet spiritual energy. Mo Ran closed his eyes, recalling the sight of Chu Wanning unleashing his killing technique. When he opened them again, his eyes reflected the innumerable ghastly fiends closing in on them.

He whipped Jiangui high above his head. Sparks erupted off the vine and rained down as Mo Ran held up his arm, his sleeve buffeted by the wind. In that moment, his silhouette seemed to overlap with Chu Wanning's in his mind, the two moving in perfect synchronicity.

"Wind."

A burst of force ravaged the land and stirred the very clouds above, pulling low the sky itself.

Behind Mo Ran, Xue Meng and Shi Mei watched as an enormous

light array bloomed scarlet like a red lotus from hell and fierce gales sliced the ground like formless blades. Jiangui whirled, a blur in Mo Ran's hand. Dust and debris swirled into the air, and the overwhelming force pulled the fiends into the maelstrom and ground them to mince. Chu Wanning's wide-range killing technique, Wind. Already, Mo Ran could use it this well…

By the time the tempest calmed, the area was scoured bare.

When Mo Ran turned around, it was to the shocked expressions of Xue Meng and Shi Mei. But he was in no mood to celebrate; he felt only that he was far from where he needed to be. If his cultivation level now was anywhere close to what it had once been, a fracture in the ghost realm barrier would be a trifling matter.

"Look! Over there!" A voice suddenly shouted in the distance.

All raised their heads to see several contingents high in the sky, riding in on swords from every horizon, each group in distinct dress and shrouded in distinct spiritual energies.

It seemed the opening of the Heavenly Rift of the Infinite Hells had finally spurred the sects of the upper cultivation realm to action. Their glowing swords touched down one after another, a massive influx of reinforcements—here were the graceful and charming personages from Rainbell Isle, there the solemn and dignified monks of Wubei Temple, and so on. Finally, the ten great sects had all joined the fray.

Increasingly stronger demons were crossing into this world like the endless swarming of locusts. But with this sudden arrival of support, the cultivators on the ground were no longer so outmatched. At the same time, Mei Hanxue and Chu Wanning at last completed the spiritual transfer, and the color of the barrier anchored at the cardinal directions of the town shifted from gold to blue.

Chu Wanning left guarding the borders to Mei Hanxue and rode

the wind into the center of the battle, alighting gracefully where the fighting was most fierce. He looked up at the rift in the sky. By now it was open wide, and an immeasurable and terrifying evil was vaguely perceptible within.

The insane strength of this entity was practically palpable, as if it had drunk the blood and consumed the brains of millions. The barrier needed to be sealed *now*, or that great evil presently suppressed within the Infinite Hells would break free and cross into the mortal realm.

Chu Wanning couldn't help but wonder if that was the whole point. Was this what the person behind the scenes was after? Did he wish to unleash some kind of great evil from hell on this world? But to what end?

"Shizun!" Shi Mei called anxiously after him.

Chu Wanning turned toward his voice.

Memories from the past life once again overlaid the present scene.

"Shizun!" Shi Mei had called for him the same way back then.

Then, too, Chu Wanning had turned toward his voice.

Shi Mei panted in the snow, covered in blood and grime, but his eyes were firm and determined. "Shizun, are you going to mend the Heavenly Rift?"

"Mn."

"But that… That's not just any fracture, that's a fracture into the Infinite Hells. Shizun, how will you manage by yourself?"

Chu Wanning did not answer immediately.

"Let me help. I learned some defensive skills at Peach Blossom Springs—I won't get in Shizun's way…"

Even now, he could almost hear that exchange that had determined life and death so many years ago. Mo Ran's blood ran cold and his head went numb. Without warning, he grabbed Shi Mei and pulled him behind his own body. Then he pushed him toward Xue Meng and yelled, "Xue Ziming, keep an eye on him! Look after him!"

Xue Meng's eyes widened. "You going somewhere, mutt?"

"I…"

The wind picked up, carrying with it the stench of blood. In the sky, there was no flurry of snowflakes; at least some things were different from the last lifetime.

Mo Ran's gaze landed on Shi Mei's lost and helpless figure. He felt his heart clench but then fill with relief. This barrier could not be mended by Chu Wanning alone. But save for his three disciples, no one else was sufficiently familiar with his spiritual cultivation to work together with him in rapport. One of them had to go.

The wind rushed fiercely through the battlefield, sweeping across thousands of miles of desperate slaughter. Mo Ran braced himself, then pulled Shi Mei into his arms. It was the first time he had ever embraced him like this so openly and directly. He held him for a breath, and then abruptly shoved him away.

Shi Mei. This time, I'm afraid the one who dies will have to be me.

"I'll help Shizun seal the barrier," Mo Ran declared in a tone that brooked no argument. He narrowed his eyes, directing another deep, meaningful gaze at Shi Mei.

Suddenly, he didn't care what others might think, didn't care that Xue Meng was right there, didn't care that he might be rejected. He had waited two lifetimes, loved for two lifetimes, and now he was leaving, possibly never to return. Standing in the ferocious wind, he wanted to say a few final words to his beloved.

“Shi Mei, actually, I…” But as he opened his mouth to speak, his words were drowned out by the howls of vicious fiends. That fleeting impulse, boiling hot as lava, grew cold in that space of a moment. In the end, it fizzled out.

“A-Ran, did you want to say something?”

A reflection from his past life flitted across Mo Ran’s eyes: he saw Shi Mei’s gentle smile from behind that half-raised curtain. How cruel it had been. It had stayed with him all his life, even until death. It was everywhere he looked.

Mo Ran grinned, the rims of his eyes a little red. “Never mind, good things can’t be said twice.”

Shi Mei said, “You…”

“I’m off to go help Shizun. When I come back…if I still feel like telling you…” His dimples were deep, his gaze filled with love. “I’ll tell you then.” With that, he turned and sped toward Chu Wanning.

Shi Mei wouldn’t die this time. Not in front of him, at least.
Mo Ran suddenly felt that the sky was more boundless and the ground more vast. He imagined that the figure before him, white robes billowing, would be the end point of this reborn life of his.

His shizun, who held the world in his heart.

As Shi Mei lay dying, for the sake of completing the repair of the barrier, for the sake of purging the rampaging fiends, Chu Wanning had ruthlessly chosen to turn his back on him. This time, the one to mend the barrier with Chu Wanning would be Mo Ran. Chu Wanning despised him so much, disliked him so much; there was no way he’d cast aside his esteemed reputation as the Beidou Immortal to spare a thought for the life or death of his insignificant self.

“Shizun.” Mo Ran came to a stop in front of him, Jiangui glowing in his hand. “This barrier is hard to repair. Let me help.”

The situation was dire; Chu Wanning shot him a wordless glance: tacit assent. He leapt up to stand at the highest point of the Chen Manor, Mo Ran following at his heels. “Set the Discernment Barrier,” Chu Wanning said.

Mo Ran moved in accord with him, following his instructions. One turned to the left and one to the right; the tips of their fingers glowed with the seal of the Discernment Barrier as they lifted their hands to the air in concert.

“Invoke!”

Spiritual energy streamed from their bodies at the invocation. The pair worked as one, each holding down a vital grounding point of the array, and used their surging power to form a scarlet-gold barrier.

As the barrier expanded outward, any demonic fiend it touched shrieked as if burned and fled back into the eye of the ghost realm. The barrier grew clearer and brighter by the second, and below their feet rose a pair of coiled dragon platforms composed of spiritual energy, which lifted the two high into the skies above the town.

Before the glaring gold and scarlet light of the barrier, the ghost eye gradually began to close. Yet at the same time, the resentful spirits within the rift grew more frantic, refusing to yield. With each inch of closure, the resentful energy spilling from the fissure intensified, and by the time the edge of the barrier was mere miles from the rift, the corruption emanating from its depths was almost a physical thing.

Mo Ran’s reborn body felt as if a heavy weight had settled over his shoulders, like an immense rock weighing a thousand tons pressed against his chest. He struggled to breathe. Across from him, Chu Wanning’s spiritual energy was strong and steady, streaming into the barrier without cease.

One inch, another. The gales whipping around them were thick

with corruption, intensifying and converging on their position. Mo Ran felt as if numberless daggers were digging into his flesh and bones.

"Shizun…" As his consciousness began to fade, memories from the past again flitted before his eyes:

He saw Shi Mei and Chu Wanning working together to repair the barrier. It was mere seconds before the worlds of yin and yang would be separated once more. The vicious ghosts, soon to again be deprived of yang energy, saw that Shi Mei's side was much weaker; they clustered together and charged toward Shi Mei as one. In an instant, Shi Mei, who had been doing his utmost to maintain the balance of the barrier, was pierced through.

Now this scene played out again, almost move for move. Only this time, the one whose heart was run through by a thousand ghosts was Mo Ran. A cascade of demonic fiends broke through the heavy cloud cover and punched through Mo Ran's chest in a flash. Red swam before Mo Ran's eyes. It took him a moment to register that it was his own blood bursting from his chest.

Drowning in the suffocating stream, he strained to turn toward Chu Wanning, only to see the man's pristine white robes and coldly impassive face turned away, not even sparing him half a glance.

Resentment flooded his chest. It settled into deep hatred.

Mo Ran fell from the coiled dragon platform, blood seeping from the corners of his lips, chest dyed a deep crimson. The fall took only a moment, but it felt like an eternity, like a drowning person sinking slowly to the bottom of the sea, never again to hear the soft whispers of the living world.

Chu Wanning hadn't lifted single finger on his behalf. He hadn't tried to stop the attack. He couldn't even be bothered to look.

As Mo Ran fell, his scarlet spiritual energy dissipated. And just as

in the previous lifetime, Chu Wanning chose to pour the remainder of his power into the portion of the barrier that Mo Ran wasn't able to mend, and, by dint of his strength alone, forced the barrier shut with a thunderous *bang*.

The fiends left on this side of the gate, cut off from the yin energy of the ghost realm, fell immediately into a mad rampage against the cultivators. They mowed through innumerous living souls in mere moments and utterly annihilated the formations of several sects.

Chu Wanning descended. When Mo Ran fell, a layer of light had materialized beneath the coiled dragon pillar to cushion his fall. But his chest had been pierced straight through, and blood pooled on the ground beneath him, just as Shi Mei's had back then. Chu Wanning beat back the fiends that rushed toward Mo Ran and, with a backhanded wave, dropped a protective barrier around him.

"Shizun…" Mo Ran, behind him, murmured quietly. "Are you leaving…" He coughed up blood, but a grin spread across his face. "Are you leaving again?"

Outside the flowing golden barrier, that person continued to stand with his back to him. Mo Ran opened his mouth, but his throat was filled with the taste of iron. "Chu Wanning, are you made of wood? Do you even know what it's like to feel sad, to be selfish? Do you… Chu Wanning… Chu Wanning…"

Mo Ran's vision blurred. He was covered in wounds from the battle. Blood streamed from a cut on his forehead and flowed into his eyes, and as he threw his head back and laughed wildly into the skies above, laughed as if he had gone mad, bloodied tears slid down his face. His voice broke on a sob. "Chu Wanning, turn around! Look at me…are you really going to leave…"

Won't you look at me one last time. I'm dying. Back then, when it was

Shi Mei, you at least spared him a glance.

You… Do you truly…dislike me this much? Look down on me this much? Why else would you refuse to look at me, just one last time? Why won't you turn around?

"Shizun…" His eyes brimmed with blood and tears. The last thing he saw through the golden barrier was the white-robed back of that lone figure as he strode away.

To go suppress demons.

In the end, it turned out that in that man's heart, there was no one less important than Mo Weiyu.

Chapter 97:
This Venerable One…

"MO RAN…Mo Ran."

Someone was calling him.

Mo Ran opened his eyes, bleary and dazed, to the sight of an unfocused silhouette in white. He vaguely felt that this person looked like Chu Wanning, but at the same time, he didn't quite dare believe it. He felt that person's hands laid over his chest, channeling an unbroken stream of spiritual energy into the still-bleeding wreckage.

So warm… Who? He blinked arduously, trying to get a better look at that blurry figure.

"Mo Ran…"

"Sh-shizun?" he murmured, fighting down the blood welling in his throat. He felt something warm and wet fall on his cheek. Slowly, his vision cleared enough to see a pair of phoenix eyes like the apricot blossoms of Jiangnan, softly beautiful with a hint of melancholy, set in a face that was pale as death and streaked with blood. Mo Ran stared foggily at him, at a loss—he had never before seen such an expression on Chu Wanning's face.

His shizun had always been cold, impassive. But the person before him now was crying.

Mo Ran reached a hand up, wanting to touch, wanting to check if this was real or just the hallucination of a dying man. But, with the tips of his fingers mere inches from that person's face, he paused.

Sometimes, hating someone was a kind of habit. If, all of a sudden, he didn't hate Chu Wanning anymore, he wouldn't know what to do

with himself. He didn't dare touch. He was afraid it might be real—but also afraid it might not be.

Behind Chu Wanning, Mo Ran spied mountains of corpses and oceans of blood. Mo Ran wasn't sure if this was the battleground at Butterfly Town, or if he had already gone to hell. He was eminently aware that he had committed countless atrocities, had sinned irredeemably, that he belonged in the Infinite Hells, never again to enter the cycle of reincarnation. But Chu Wanning was a good person. Why would he be here with him, to suffer an eternity in hell?

"Just a little longer," Chu Wanning's voice was distant and hazy, as if coming to him from the depths of an ocean. "You have to stay awake, or else…"

Mo Ran watched blood seep from the corner of Chu Wanning's mouth. The golden light grew more and more brilliant until the person before him was suddenly enveloped in the blinding glow and shrank, taking on the small form of a child. "Or else you are no disciple of the Yuheng Elder—no disciple of mine."

"Xia-shidi?!"

Chu Wanning had transformed into Xia Sini before his eyes. Mo Ran was so shocked that his wound blazed with pain. He passed out again before he could process a single thought.

"Mo Ran." A voice so soft it was almost a sigh. He didn't know if it was a hallucination from his past life or a lingering murmur by his ear. "I'm sorry, it was this master's fault…"

This line again! *This line again!*

Chu Wanning, I don't want you to apologize, I want you to—

To what? He faltered, not knowing what it was that he wanted. If he didn't want an apology, then what *did* he want?

Mo Ran's eyes flew open. His breath came in harsh pants, and his clothes were soaked with sweat. He looked up to see a clean, tidy room, sparsely decorated.

He was back at his room in Sisheng Peak. He was still alive…

He glanced around in disbelief, then raised a slightly chilly hand to feel for the wound on his chest. It was wrapped in several layers of bandages. Blood had seeped through the gauze and dyed it red, and it ached when touched, but underneath, his heart still beat rhythmically, powerfully, beating with the promise of the rest of his life.

He lived. *He lived!* His blood coursed wildly, vigorously through his youthful body. The tips of his fingers trembled with it; it thrummed through his very soul.

He heard the soft swish of a curtain being lifted. Mo Ran looked up from where he sat on the bed and came face-to-face with the beauty that had just entered. It must have been cold outside; his long black hair cascaded loosely over a white, fur-lined mantle, and when he lifted those soft, bright eyes, a faint redness dyed their corners, more lovely than any makeup.

Shi Mei started a little; he hadn't expected Mo Ran to be awake. "A-Ran? Y-you…"

"Shi Mei! Shi Mei!" Mo Ran called his name over and over, eyes as bright and glittering as obsidian. He jumped up from the bed, ignoring the protests of his wound, and grinned toothily as he flung himself at Shi Mingjing. He hugged him tightly and repeated ecstatically, "I'm so glad! You're alive! I'm alive! It's over, it's all over!"

The Heavenly Rift had been the greatest calamity of his past life. Fiends and demons had descended from above, stolen Shi Mei, and thrown Mo Ran into the abyss of sin. This was the one thing that had

haunted him after rebirth. He had been afraid it would happen all over again, that he would be left all alone once more, on the lonely path toward that empty Wushan Palace, treading on the bones of those he had once loved and cared for.

But the heavens were not unkind to him. Everything had changed when he'd stepped forward with the will to die in Shi Mei's place. He wouldn't be alone again, abandoned and rebuked by all; wouldn't be cast out in the dead of night, henceforth a lonely wanderer. Starting today, the curse was broken.

He had truly escaped the nightmare of his past life, truly been reborn.

Mo Ran clung to Shi Mei for a long time. When he let go, his eyes were bright like fireworks, glittering like the starry night.

Shi Mei stood dazed and unmoving while Mo Ran wrapped his arms around his shoulders and smiled down at him. They stayed that way for several minutes before Shi Mei slowly came back to his senses and leaned in to press his forehead to the underside of Mo Ran's jaw. "A-Ran."

"Mhm?"

Shi Mei lifted his face. He wore a faint smile, but his eyes were a little wet. "I'm so glad you're okay."

Mo Ran smiled and stroked his hair, then gathered Shi Mei's hands in his own. "Of course I'm okay, silly," he reassured him. "Why wouldn't I be? I…"

Before he could say more, the curtain was lifted again as another figure strode in.

"Xue Meng?"

No response. This guy was always so petty; he was probably still

upset to have been outdone at the battle at Butterfly Town. Xue Meng wore a sullen expression, and his lips were pressed into a thin line. When he saw Mo Ran up and about, he paused for a beat before turning to Shi Mei. “When did he wake up?”

Shi Mei hesitated before answering. A hint of worry crept into his voice as he said, “Just now.”

Another pause. “I see.” Xue Meng still refused to look at Mo Ran.

Look at this little brat, Mo Ran thought to himself, *sulking like this just ’cause he didn’t get to be the hero. He’s acting like someone stole his candy or something.* But Mo Ran was in quite a buoyant mood, so for once, he was willing to overlook it. He smiled and said, “Looks like I was out for a while there, huh? Who brought me back?”

“Who else?” Xue Meng flung his sleeve and tucked his hand behind his back. “It was Shizun, of course.”

“Ah.” Mo Ran was taken aback at this revelation. Fragments of blurry memory from his half-conscious state passed before his eyes. Now that he was awake, he was so overwhelmed with shock and elation that he was even less sure what of the things he’d seen back then were real or imagined.

“Shizun…” he mumbled. “Xia-shidi…”

At this, Xue Meng twitched almost imperceptibly. “So,” he asked stiffly, “you saw?”

“Saw what?”

“That Xia-shidi is Shizun.”

Mo Ran had still been only guessing. Upon being suddenly told outright like this, his entire face went white. *“What?!”*

Xue Meng’s head snapped around to stare at him. He wore a strange expression, as though it were taking all he had to keep some

emotion in check. “What do you mean *what*? I thought you already knew.”

“How would I know that!” Mo Ran yelped. “I just… I was drifting in and out, and it was all blurry. I thought I might have seen the two of them overlapping. I…”

He thought back to the time he’d spent with Xia Sini at the Peach Blossom Springs, and the two of them asleep in the same bed. He thought back to when he’d lost control at Rainbell Isle, and the golden hair clasp that had tumbled out as he tore at Chu Wanning’s robes.

And the handkerchief, embroidered with a haitang blossom.

Clothing that grew and shrank with its wearer.

The little jar of chicken soup, clutched tightly in Xia Sini’s arms.

The way he had looked up at Mo Ran and called him *shixiong*, and how Mo Ran had patted him on the head and grinned, saying, *We’ll be brothers from here on out. Shixiong will dote on you.*

One after another, those memories rose before his eyes and scattered like smoke. Now it was Chu Wanning, his face impassive, expression far too cold; now it was Xia Sini, his lips pressed together, refusing to speak. He had once told Xia Sini that Chu Wanning was no good, that he disliked him. He had also once patiently brushed Xia Sini’s long hair. His hair had been so soft, flowing between his fingers like ink.

Now that he thought about it, they really were so much alike.

Mo Ran felt like his head was about to explode. He paced in a tight circle, back and forth, as he muttered, “Shizun is Xia-shidi… Shizun is Xia-shidi… Shizun is…” He came to an abrupt stop, almost crazed. “You’ve got to be kidding me! How could Shizun possibly be Xia-shidi?!”

“A-Ran…”

Mo Ran didn't know whether to laugh or cry. "S-sure they're pretty similar in a lot of ways, but…but they're not the *same*. Xia-shidi is such a good person; how could—"

"The hell do you mean by that?" Xue Meng cut him off, pinning him with a sharp glare. "Xia-shidi is 'such a good person'? So, what, someone who's a good person couldn't possibly be Shizun?"

"Of course I'm not saying Shizun isn't a good person," Mo Ran countered. "It's just that Xia-shidi has always been so sincere with me. I basically viewed him as my own little brother! How am I supposed to just accept it when you suddenly tell me he's actually Shizun."

"Xia-shidi is sincere, huh?" Xue Meng snarled. "Then Shizun is insincere?"

Hearing the temper rising in Xue Meng's voice, Shi Mei hurried to tug on his sleeve. "Young master, remember what Uncle said! A-Ran just woke up. He…"

But Xue Meng shook him off, his brown eyes still fixed on Mo Ran's face. So infuriated was he that the vein at his neck throbbed like a hissing viper, about to sink venomous fangs into its prey, ready to devour it. "Mo Weiyu, you'd better explain it to me here and now: Why can't Shizun be Xia Sini? In what does he lack sincerity, huh? Tell me clearly, what part of him do you consider fake?!"

The interrogative onslaught rankled Mo Ran only a little; it wasn't like he hadn't seen Xue Meng pissed off before. In the last lifetime, Xue Meng had been more or less like this during every single one of their encounters after he became Emperor Taxian-jun. Still, it was irksome. Mo Ran frowned and snapped, "What's it to you? That's between me and him."

"Between you and him?" Xue Meng repeated. "Have you ever even thought about him?"

Mo Ran was so mad he laughed. “The hell’s your problem, Xue Ziming? Seriously, when did you finally lose it? C’mon, Shi Mei, let’s go to Loyalty Hall. Maybe Uncle and Shizun know what’s set him off.” He brushed past Xue Meng, pulling Shi Mei along.

Xue Meng stood rooted in place for some time, as if trying his damnedest to stop himself. But just as Mo Ran was about to step out the door, his restraint cracked, and he whipped around, roaring, “Mo Weiyu, have you ever *once* spared a thought for this shizun of yours?!”

Mo Ran said nothing. He became even more agitated; his steps halted, and his originally cheerful and relaxed brows drew low in a scowl.

Shi Mei squeezed his hand. “Don’t mind him,” he whispered uneasily, “he’s been a bit irritable lately. Come on, let’s go.”

Mo Ran paused. “Mn.”

But his hand had only brushed the curtain, hadn’t even lifted it yet, when Xue Meng’s voice rang out again, stifled, inflamed and distraught, like it had leapt from a raging fire. “Mo Weiyu, you fucker, you piece of shit.”

The curtain dropped back into place with a swish. Mo Ran closed his eyes, then opened them again.

“A-Ran…” Shi Mei tried to pull him back, but Mo Ran gently pushed him aside.

Mo Ran turned his head to look at Xue Meng, then faced him squarely. The two of them were around the same age, but Mo Ran was already taller by a span, and he could appear quite cold and menacing when he wanted to. His mouth curved in a smile, but his black eyes were deep, without the slightest hint of mirth. “So I’m a piece of shit now, am I. Xue Ziming, I’ve never treated our shizun with anything but respect. Nor did I stand idly by at the battle of the Heavenly Rift. The

barrier to the Infinite Hells couldn't be mended by his strength alone, so I stepped up to help. Let me ask you—as his disciple, have I done anything wrong?"

Xue Meng remained silent.

"My strength falls far short of his, so I couldn't hold out till the end when we were mending the barrier. I fell from the coiled dragon pillar, but he didn't spare me so much as a glance. He couldn't care less whether I lived or died. Let me ask you again, in my shoes, would you not feel bitter and disappointed?"

"Mo Ran…"

Mo Ran finally gave voice to the grievance that had eaten away at him for two lifetimes. His handsome features twisted into something dark as he spoke of this sore spot. He forced out each syllable, enunciating every word. "As I see it, I've done my duty, and owe him nothing. What right do you have to stand here before me and call me a piece of shit? Xue Meng, you think I've never cared for him? You're wrong, I have.

"But he's made of stone," Mo Ran continued in a low voice, every word like a knife to his heart, each one drawing blood. "Xue Meng, listen to me, I don't care how powerful a cultivator he is in the eyes of the world, what a prestigious zongshi, that he's Yuheng of the Night Sky, Beidou Immortal—none of that matters. What matters is this: at the battle of the Heavenly Rift, I nearly died. Yet when I begged for him to look back, to spare me a glance, he wouldn't even give me that."

It was such a chilling, enraging thing. But as he spoke of it, he was strangely calm; only his eyes were a little red. "And Xue Meng, I can guarantee you, no matter who had fallen from the pillar back then—even if it wasn't me, even if it was you or Shi Mei—he wouldn't have saved you either." *Because I saw it with my own eyes.* Chu Wanning had

turned and left his own disciple's body to cool in the snowstorm that blotted out the sky. "After all, nothing is more important than his good name as the Beidou Immortal," Mo Ran sneered coldly. Perhaps it was due to the room's dim light that he looked a little forlorn. "You'll live if you're lucky. Die if you're not."

His last word was still hanging in the air when there came a blur before his eyes alongside a rush of wind. The room was narrow, and Shi Mei was behind him. Even if he sensed it coming, Mo Ran couldn't dodge lest Shi Mei come to harm. He stood his ground and took the blow.

Xue Meng lunged at him like a cheetah, gripped him by the collar, and a loud *crack* rang out as he struck Mo Ran across the face, holding nothing back. At being slapped out of the blue, Mo Ran's temper flared as well. He twisted his wrist to seize the raging youth and snarled through gritted teeth, "Xue Ziming! The fuck do you think you're doing?!"

Xue Meng didn't answer, bellowing, "Mo Weiyu, you bastard!"

He had no interest in talking anymore, but rampaged like he really had lost his mind. He brawled brutally with Mo Ran right there in that desolate little room, the two instantly at each other's throats like a pair of trapped beasts. They fought like they wanted to rip each other to ribbons, like they wanted to tear one another apart and swallow each other blood, bone, and all. A single lamp flickered in the room, and it cast their maddened silhouettes against the stone wall, like a shadow play of bloodthirsty beasts, or a picture of frenzied demons.

Suddenly, Mo Ran heard Xue Meng choke back a sob. It was so quiet that he suspected he'd misheard. But just as he thought so, several fat teardrops splashed onto the back of his hand.

Xue Meng suddenly released Mo Ran and shoved him away. Then

he curled up on the ground, wrapped his arms around his knees, and started bawling miserably where he sat.

Mo Ran's cheek was yet red and swollen, but he was utterly stumped by this turn of events. It wasn't like he'd actually attempted any deadly moves. Surely he hadn't hurt him that bad—besides, his cousin had thrown the first punch. So why'd he…

He was still puzzling it over when Xue Meng raised his voice, screaming hoarsely between broken sobs. "How could you say he didn't save you? *How could you say he didn't save you?!*" Tears rolled down his cheeks, insuppressible.

Off to the side, Shi Mei sighed and looked down in silence. It seemed that Xue Meng couldn't keep things quiet, after all.

Between sobs, Xue Meng choked out, "He'd be so sad if he heard you say that from the underworld."

These words were too sudden—Mo Ran couldn't process them at first. In a daze, he asked, "What?"

Xue Meng wept on and on. His venomous fangs had indeed pierced Mo Ran's neck, but he had also pricked himself. He cried so miserably, so brokenly, wiping desperately at his face, at his eyes, his gaze flickering between ferocity and sorrow. Xue Meng refused to get up from where he crouched on the floor. There he stayed, his face buried in the crook of his arm, for a long, long time.

Mo Ran felt a slow numbness creep up from the soles of his feet until his entire body was frozen. He felt his lips move. Heard his voice ask, "Xue Meng, what did you just say?"

Xue Meng sobbed for what seemed like ages—or perhaps it was actually seconds, and only felt like an eternity to Mo Ran as he waited for that thunderbolt of an answer.

"Shizun…" Xue Meng finally choked out. "He's gone."

For a moment, Mo Ran said nothing. His whole body felt cold; distantly, he heard those words, yet couldn't seem to comprehend them.

Gone? What do you mean gone? Gone where?

Who's gone?… Who's gone?!

Who's gone?!

Xue Meng lifted his head slowly. There was hatred in his eyes, and mockery, and the deepest pain and loathing. "Do you know why he didn't look back?"

Mo Ran stared mutely.

"Father said that sealing the Heavenly Rift took everything in him. Did you think you were the only one struck by the fiendish energy of the ghost realm? The Discernment Barrier is twinned! Whatever damage you took, he suffered the same! It's just that he endured it in silence and said nothing to anyone."

Mo Ran felt a droning between his ears. *Then when he didn't save Shi Mei in the previous lifetime, was that also because…* He didn't dare finish the thought. The tips of his fingers shook. "No way. But he was so poised…"

"When has he ever been anything but poised before others?" Fresh tears welled up and overflowed Xue Meng's eyes as he spoke. "By the time he came down, his spiritual energy had been exhausted. Why do you think he put a protective barrier around you and left without looking back?"

Xue Meng's words dripped with tears of blood. "Shizun knew he couldn't hang on for much longer. But his cultivation was high, so the moment he showed any sign of weakness, all the fiends would be drawn to him. Mo Ran, Mo Ran…did you really think he left because he abandoned you?"

Mo Ran was speechless, struck dumb.

"He left to protect *you*! Mo Weiyu! So you wouldn't get caught up in that! The fiends went berserk when the gateway to the Infinite Hells closed, the battle dragged on till nightfall, so many were killed or injured—who had time for you?! Even my father didn't know you were gone until he was already back at Sisheng Peak with the injured Xuanji Elder."

Xue Meng paused for a second, his breathing harsh, before forcing the rest of the words through the tightness in his throat. "Mo Weiyu, *he* was the one who brought you back. He was the one who took a pill that let him regain his original form so he could pull you from the bloody wreckage, from the mountain of corpses. He was the one covered in wounds, but he still passed you the last remnant of his spiritual power."

"No way…"

"*H*e brought you home. You were unconscious, and his spiritual energy was completely drained. He was no different from an ordinary person at that time; he couldn't use a single technique, not even a simple communication spell. He could only carry you on his back and climb up the stairs to Sisheng Peak, step by step."

"No…"

"Over three thousand steps. He…without any spiritual power…"

Mo Ran closed his eyes. He could almost see, there under the pale moonlight, Chu Wanning carrying a barely breathing Mo Ran, climbing haltingly up those endless stairs, white robes stained a bloody crimson. That person who had ever been so distant and unreachable, so pristine and untarnished. Beidou Immortal, Yuheng of the Night Sky.

Mo Ran's throat was tight. His voice shook. "No way… How did he…"

"I wondered the same." Xue Meng stared into the distance with red-rimmed eyes, looking lost. "When I spotted him, I thought that, surely, I had gone mad. Surely I was seeing things. Because I was also thinking," the rest came out in a sigh, "how did he even…"

"No way…" Mo Ran choked on a low sob and clutched at his head. He murmured helplessly, "No way…"

"The stairs are still stained with a trail of blood; that's the road he took to bring you home." Xue Meng's hatred made him ruthless. "Go look for yourself, Mo Ran. Go look."

"No way!"

The shock and helplessness were more than he could bear; Mo Ran flew into a rage. Without warning, he grabbed Xue Meng, hauled him up off the ground, and slammed him into the wall. His features twisted into something bestial. "No way! No *fucking* way! How could he have saved me? He's always disliked me, always looked down on me!"

Xue Meng said nothing for a moment. Then his mouth bent in a miserable grin. "Mo Weiyu, it's not that he looked down on you." In the guttering candlelight, Xue Meng raised his eyes, lashes damp with tears, and leveled him with a gaze suffused with hatred. "It's that *I* look down on you."

Mo Ran could only stare at him.

"I look down on you, Xuanji Elder looks down on you, Tanlang Elder looks down on you… Who the fuck do you think you are?" Xue Meng chewed up the words and spit them in Mo Ran's face. "You son of a bitch."

"You—!"

Xue Meng burst out laughing, tilting his head back to look at the dim ceiling. “Mo Ran, in all of Sisheng Peak, he was the one who thought most highly of you. And this is how you’ve repaid him.”
He laughed and laughed, then he squeezed his eyes shut and tears began to fall again. This time, he wept quietly. “Mo Ran, your Xia-shidi, my shizun, he’s dead.”

Mo Ran had been bitten by the most venomous snake in the world. He let go of Xue Meng, as if burned, and stumbled backward. For the first time, he understood those words. His entire body began to tremble.

“Ge.” Xue Meng suddenly called out to him.

Mo Ran continued backing away, until his back collided with the ice-cold wall; there was no escape.

“Ge.” Xue Meng had finally stopped crying, but his voice was flat, like he was dead. “We don’t have a shizun anymore.”

Chapter 98:
Shizun, I'm Begging You, Please Pay Attention to Me

SISHENG PEAK had a cliff with a funny name, called Aaaaah.

There were numerous stories within the sect as to how this name came to be. The most common was that people often fell from it due to how sheer it was, crying out "Aaaaah!"

But Mo Ran knew that wasn't the reason.

The cliff rose high into the clouds, steep and nigh impossible to scale. It was terribly cold, and its top was covered in snow year-round. This was where the dead of Sisheng Peak lay while they awaited their funerals.

Mo Ran had only ever come here once in his past life.

Then, as now, it had been after the bloody battle that followed the opening of the rift to the Infinite Hells, which had ended countless lives, Shi Mei's among them. He had refused to accept reality and had knelt by Shi Mei's coffin for days on end, gazing at his face within, which looked almost as if he were merely sleeping.

"It's called 'Aaaaah' from back when your dad passed," was what Xue Zhengyong had revealed to him in the past life as he accompanied his nephew in the chill air of the Frostsky Hall. "I only had one brother. We founded Sisheng Peak together. But your dad…he was stubborn, just like you. He barely even got to enjoy the good life, or maybe he got sick of it. But one slip against the demons, and he was gone."

It was freezing inside Frostsky Hall. Xue Zhengyong took a swig from the sheepskin of wine he'd brought, then offered it to Mo Ran. "Here, have some. Just don't tell your aunt."

Mo Ran didn't take it; didn't move.

Xue Zhengyong sighed. "I was so miserable in those days; it felt like my heart had been dug out. All I did was sit up here with your dad and cry. I sound pretty awful when I cry; I was just howling like *aaaaah*—and that's where the name came from." He glanced at Mo Ran and clapped him on the shoulder. "Your uncle isn't well-read or anything, but I know this much: life is ephemeral like the morning dew, over in a blink. Mingjing's just gone on a bit ahead of you. You can be brothers[7] again in the next life."

Mo Ran slowly closed his eyes.

"Condolences and whatnot are just words," Xue Zhengyong continued. "If you're sad, go ahead and cry. If you don't want to leave, stay and keep him company. But you have to eat, and you have to drink your water. Go grab a bite at Mengpo Hall. After that, you can come back here and kneel as long as you want. I won't stop you."

Frostsky Hall was frigid and silent. White silk drifted lightly within the grand hall, like gentle fingers brushing the brow.

Mo Ran gradually opened his eyes.

The coffin was the same as the one in his memory, cast from the black snow of Kunlun, lustrous and translucent, with threads of frozen mist streaming from the surface. Only this time, the body lying inside was Chu Wanning's.

Mo Ran had never imagined that the one to die in the Heavenly Rift in this lifetime would be Chu Wanning. He was wholly taken by surprise; he didn't know how to react. Faced with this person's ice-cold body, he found that he didn't feel much of anything— not joy at the death of his foe, nor grief at the passing of his shizun.

Mo Ran stared at Chu Wanning through lowered lashes for a long while, almost disbelieving. His face appeared even colder than usual,

now covered in a layer of frost in truth. Flecks of ice clung to his closed lashes. His lips were a pale blue, and his skin was nearly transparent, the faint blue of veins visible like minute cracks in porcelain.

How could he have been the one to die?

Mo Ran raised his hand to touch Chu Wanning's cheek; it was cold. His hand traced down to his throat, his neck; there was no pulse. And then to his hand. He gripped it; the joints were already beginning to stiffen, and the skin there felt rough. Mo Ran thought it strange—the tips of Chu Wanning's fingers were lightly calloused, but his palms had ever been soft and delicate. Despite himself, he looked closer. Scores of lacerations covered his hands: open cuts that, although cleaned, would never heal.

He remembered Xue Meng's words.

His spiritual energy was completely drained. He was no different from an ordinary person at that time. He couldn't use a single technique, not even a simple communication spell. He could only carry you on his back and climb up the stairs of Sisheng Peak, step by step.

And when he couldn't do that anymore, when he couldn't even stand, he had crawled on the ground, on his knees, dragging him until his fingers were torn and his hands covered in blood.

All to bring him home.

"Was it you who carried me back?" Mo Ran muttered hollowly.

His question was met with only silence.

"Chu Wanning, was it you…?"

Silence. No reply.

"I won't believe it unless you nod," Mo Ran said to the man in the coffin. His expression was placid, as if fully expecting the person before him to wake up. "Chu Wanning, give me a nod. Just one nod, and I'll

believe you, and I won't hate you anymore. Just one nod, okay?"

But Chu Wanning only lay there, cold and expressionless, as if it made no difference to him whether Mo Ran hated him or not. He himself had left with a clear conscience, abandoning the living to their guilt.

Living or dead, this person had always been more maddening than he was pitiable. Mo Ran sneered. "Then again," he said, "when have you ever listened to me?"

As he stared at Chu Wanning, he suddenly felt that the whole thing was so absurd. All these years, he'd hated Chu Wanning for looking down on him. The hatred had deepened when he failed to save Shi Mei. For over a decade, this hatred had festered, twisting and turning in his heart. Then one day, out of nowhere, he was told—

When Chu Wanning turned and left back then, it was to protect you!

He was suddenly told that—

The Discernment Barrier is twinned! Whatever damage you took, he suffered the same!

His spiritual energy was spent. He couldn't even protect himself anymore, he…

Great. Awesome. Perfect. Chu Wanning was right in everything he did. Then what about Mo Ran? Head in the dark like a know-nothing idiot, running in circles like a goddamn clown, hissing and snarling in his hatred for so long. And for what?!

A brief misunderstanding was like a smudge of dirt on a healing wound. As long as it was discovered in time, washed off, and the salve reapplied, everything would be fine. But if the misunderstanding was allowed to persist for ten, twenty years; if the person trapped in that web poured in endless hatred, worries, repression, and even his life—these emotions would scab over and grow into new skin, would become

part of one's body.

And then, to suddenly be told, *That's not how it is, you've got it all wrong.* What then? The dirt had lodged under the skin with the passing of time, already been subsumed into the blood. To remove that bygone hatred, the healed flesh would have to be ripped open again.

A misunderstanding of one year is a misunderstanding. A misunderstanding of ten years is an injustice. A misunderstanding of a lifetime, from life unto death, is fate.

Their fate was blighted.

The heavy gates of the Frostsky Hall swung slowly open.

Just as in the previous lifetime, Xue Zhengyong, a sheepskin of wine in his hand, trod heavily to Mo Ran's side and sat on the floor beside him. "I heard you were here. Uncle will keep you company." Xue Zhengyong's fierce eyes were red; he had plainly been crying not long ago. "And him too."

Mo Ran said nothing. Xue Zhengyong twisted open the cap of the sheepskin and drank deeply before falling still. He wiped roughly at his face and, with great effort, summoned a grin. "Yuheng never liked it when I drank, but now…" He sighed. "No, never mind, never mind. I'm not even that old, but I've already seen off so many friends. Ran-er, do you know how that feels?"

Mo Ran lowered his lashes, silent. Xue Zhengyong had asked him the same question in his past life. Back then, he'd only had eyes for Shi Mei's lifeless body—what did he care if others lived or died? He didn't understand, and he didn't want to.

But how could he not understand now?

Before he had been reborn, he had stood alone in the empty halls

of Wushan Palace. One day, he had dreamt of long-gone days as Yuheng's disciple and had jolted awake from his light slumber gripped by a sudden impulse to visit his old room in the disciple quarters. When he opened the door and stepped inside, that narrow room, unused for so long, was covered in a layer of dust.

He had found a small fragrance burner toppled onto the floor, knocked over by someone many years ago. He picked it up and moved out of habit to put it back in its customary place. But the years had flowed by like a swift stream; holding the burner, he suddenly froze. "Where did I used to keep this burner?"

He couldn't remember. His eagle-like gaze swept across the attendants behind him, but their faces were blurs; he couldn't tell one from another. But of course these people wouldn't know where in his old room the youthful emperor used to keep this fragrance burner.

"Where did I keep this burner?" He couldn't remember, and anyone who could was dead or gone.

How could Mo Ran not understand how Xue Zhengyong felt right now?

"Every now and then, out of the blue, I'll recall some joke from my youth and blurt it out. But then I realize not a single person who gets it is around anymore." Xue Zhengyong took another gulp of wine and, lowering his head, let out a mirthless laugh. "Like your dad, or our friends from before…or your shizun. Ran-er, do you know why this cliff is called Aaaaah?" The tears in his eyes refracted fragments of light.

Mo Ran knew what he wanted to say, but he was too distraught to hear about his dead father from Xue Zhengyong just now. "I know. It's because Uncle used to cry here."

"Ah…" Xue Zhengyong paused and blinked slowly, the wrinkles at the corners of his eyes deep. "Did your aunt tell you?"

“Mn.”

Xue Zhengyong wiped away his tears and took a deep breath. “All right, okay. Then you already know what Uncle wanted to say. Go ahead and let it out if you’re sad. It’s all right. There’s no shame in crying for someone.”

But Mo Ran didn’t cry. Maybe his heart had already hardened into iron after two lifetimes of this. Compared to his devastation at Shi Mei’s death back then, his current self was very calm. So calm that he was unsettled by his own numbness, surprised to find that he was really this heartless.

Xue Zhengyong finished drinking and stayed a while longer, then got to his feet rather unsteadily. Perhaps his legs had lost feeling from kneeling so long, or perhaps he had drunk too much. His broad hand clapped Mo Ran on the shoulder. “The Heavenly Rift’s been closed, but we still don’t know who’s behind it all. Maybe that was the end of it, but there may be another big battle on the horizon. Ran-er, make sure you go down and eat something. Don’t wreck your body.”

With that, he turned and left.

It was night, and outside Frostsky Hall a waning crescent hung in the skies above. As he trod through the snow that blanketed the cliff year-round, half a skin of wine in hand, Xue Zhengyong’s voice, deep and rough like a broken gong, rang out in a short tune from Sichuan:

“Greeting old friends, half but ghosts, meeting only in cups of wine. Beneath the osmanthus tree hides a pot of wine, a drink shared between timeworn faces and streaks of white. The first light of dawn shatters the dream, all depart, leaving me alone with my aged tears. I’d give what remains of my life to the God of Dreams, if only to call you back, cup after cup.”[8]

Things were different from the past life, after all; the one who died

wasn't Shi Mei, but Chu Wanning, and so Xue Zhengyong was stricken by an even deeper sorrow.

With his back to the open gates of Frostsky Hall, Mo Ran listened to the lingering sound of that hoarse voice, resonant and mournful. Little by little, like an eagle soaring over the horizon, the voice grew distant, until it was swallowed by the wind and snow. The world was blanketed by a brilliant layer of white, and the moon high in the boundless sky washed over all till it was faint and insubstantial, leaving only one line that echoed over and over.

"Leaving me alone with my aged tears…leaving me alone with my aged tears…"

Mo Ran wasn't sure how much time had passed when he finally left Frostsky Hall to begin his slow descent down the mountain.

His uncle was right. The Heavenly Rift might be closed, but this affair was far from over. Chu Wanning was gone; if there were another battle, Mo Ran would have to fend for himself.

It was already late by the time he reached Mengpo Hall, and there was no one around save the old woman who made the late-night supper.

Mo Ran asked for a small bowl of noodles and found a corner spot in which to slowly eat. The noodles were hot and numbing, warm in his stomach. Mengpo Hall was dimly lit, and hazy when he glanced up through the thick screen of steam between ravenous bites.

He recalled how stubborn he'd been after Shi Mei's death in his past life; how he had refused to leave or eat for three whole days. And how, later, when he had finally been convinced to leave Frostsky Hall to eat something, he had happened across Chu Wanning in the kitchen, his back to Mo Ran as he clumsily rolled wrappers and mixed filling. There had been flour and water on the table, and a few rows of wontons

arranged in a neat line.

Clang. The crash of every bit of it being swept off that table rang out from the bygone past and stilled the chopsticks in the present Mo Ran's hand. Suddenly, it was hard for him to swallow. At the time, he had thought that Chu Wanning was taunting him, that he purposely wanted to hurt him. But, thinking back on it now, it was possible that Chu Wanning really did only want to make him a bowl of wontons in place of the departed Shi Mei.

"Who the fuck do you think you are?! Do you have any right to use the things he used? To make the food he made? Shi Mei is dead—are you happy now? Or do you have to hound all your disciples to death or madness before you're satisfied? Chu Wanning! There's no one left in this world who could make those wontons ever again. No matter how much you imitate him, you'll never even come close!"

Each word a stab to the heart.

He went back to eating his noodles, unwilling to think any more on it. But it wasn't that easy; his memories gave him no peace.

He remembered Chu Wanning's face in that moment with awful clarity, clearer than ever before. His face had betrayed nothing, neither joy nor sorrow. He remembered every detail with an unprecedented sharpness. He remembered the faint tremble at the tips of those fingers, the smudge of flour on the plane of that cheek. He remembered the plump, snowy wontons scattered across the floor. He remembered how Chu Wanning had lowered his lashes and bent to carefully pick up those wontons, now unfit to eat, then thrown them away with his own hands.

Thrown them away with his own hands.

More than half of the noodles with peas were still left, but Mo Ran couldn't stomach another bite. He pushed the bowl away and fled before this place could drive him insane. He dashed madly through Sisheng

Peak, as if trying to outrun this decade-long misunderstanding, as if trying to recover those ridiculous years, as if trying to catch up to that person who had left Mengpo Hall that day all alone.

Catch up to him so he could say, *I'm sorry, I was wrong to hate you.*

In the deep black of night, Mo Ran ran aimlessly. He ran and ran, but everywhere he went, he saw remnants of Chu Wanning's shadow: the Platform of Sin and Virtue, where Chu Wanning had taught him to read and trained him in swordplay; Naihe Bridge, where he had shared an umbrella with him as they walked together; Clearsky Hall, where he had endured punishment by striking and left without anyone by his side. He felt more and more distraught, more and more helpless.

Suddenly, he ran into an open clearing, and it felt like the haze had dissipated, and he could once again see the bright moon above. He came to a stop, taking shuddering breaths.

The Heaven-Piercing Tower.

The place where he had died in his last life. The place where he had first met Chu Wanning.

With mayhem in his eyes like a battlefield in chaos, with his heart beating wild like the pounding of war drums, powerless to ward off the tidal surge of the past and helpless to avoid its relentless assault—he had been forced here in the end. Here, where the moonlight was palest white, and the breeze a gentle caress. Where they had first met.

Mo Ran finally stopped running. He knew he couldn't escape it: in this life, he was bound to owe Chu Wanning. Slowly, Mo Ran strode up the steps toward that magnificent haitang tree. He reached out and laid his palm on the bark of the trunk, dry and hard as a calloused heart.

It had been nearly three days since Chu Wanning's death.

Mo Ran looked up. The flowering tree looked as gentle as ever. Only then did an unfathomable sorrow well up in his chest. With his

forehead pressed to the trunk of the tree, he finally cried, his tears falling like rain. “Shizun, Shizun,” he murmured between choked sobs. Over and over, he repeated those words he had spoken the day he first met Chu Wanning: “Won’t you pay attention to me… Please pay attention to me…”

But although the scenery remained the same, the people were no more. Mo Ran stood before the Heaven-Piercing Tower, alone. No one would pay attention to him anymore. No one would ever meet him here again.

The reborn Mo Ran had the body of a youth, but within it was the soul of the thirty-two-year-old Taxian-jun. He had seen far too much of life and death, tasted all the joy and sorrow the world had to offer. Thus, in this reborn life, he had never displayed much genuine emotion; he had always remained muted, as if hidden behind a mask. Yet at present, the loss and anguish written on his face was so raw and vulnerable, so genuine and naïve. Only now was he like an ordinary youth who had lost his shizun, like a child who had been abandoned, like a stray dog that no longer had a home to return to.

Pay attention to me.

Please pay attention to me…

In the end, the only reply was the rustle of leaves and the dancing shadows of flowers. The person with such striking features who had stood beneath the haitang tree that year would never again—*could* never again—lift his head to look at him. Not even one last glance.

Chapter 99:
Shizun's Third Weapon

THAT NIGHT, Mo Ran slept propped against the haitang tree.

There were many places in Sisheng Peak that bore traces of Chu Wanning's presence. If he'd wanted to pay his respects, there was none more suitable than Red Lotus Pavilion. But only leaning against this tree dulled the ache in his heart; only here could he feel a faint connection to the world of the living.

He had once been certain that taking Chu Wanning as his master was the greatest misfortune of his life, that it had been a mistake from the start. Only now did he see that the unfortunate one wasn't him, wasn't Mo Weiyu, but the one who stood under the flowers that day, head bowed and lost in thought. The unfortunate one was Chu Wanning.

Xianjun, Xianjun, pay attention to me.

He seemed to vaguely recall those words as the first he had said to his shizun. Maybe not those exact words—it had been too long ago, and he no longer remembered it clearly. But he could still remember vividly the look on Chu Wanning's face as his lashes flicked up, bewildered and startled.

How gentle he had looked then.

As he lay beneath the flowering tree, Mo Ran thought that, if time could flow backward, back to the day he chose his master, he absolutely shouldn't pester Chu Wanning into accepting him as a disciple again, no matter what. Because the price exacted for that moment, for the flicker of those eyelashes, was the endless entanglement to follow—was Chu Wanning's very life.

Two lifetimes. His shizun had come to ruin at his hands.

Two lifetimes…

Mo Ran's throat worked in a swallow, and he closed his eyes against the threat of a sob. He passed a long while in an agony that felt as if a million ants gnawed at his heart before finally drifting into a fitful slumber. In his dreamscape, a fragment of memory he'd dared not touch since his rebirth wrested free of its chains, raised its knife, and carved out his heart.

At that time, he had stood at the pinnacle of the human realm, and Chu Wanning, his spiritual core abolished, had been a prisoner in his palace.

He had been targeted in recent days by several successive assassination attempts, the last perpetrated by Xue Meng and Mei Hanxue. Although Mo Ran was too powerful to yield his life to them, he had sustained grave injuries. He'd needed to convalesce for over a month within the confines of his palace before he recovered his strength.

Sichuan was a damp place, even more so in those days, and the pitter-patter of rain could be heard day and night.

Mo Ran stood under the shelter of the colonnade, his fingers pale as jade where they clutched the hem of the heavy brocade cloak draped over his shoulders. He gazed at the gray skies overhead, his countenance caught between mirth and madness. Even in silence, the twisted nature that radiated from him was unmistakable. He had been born with such a handsome face, yet the light in his eyes was dark and ruthless, devoid of warmth.

And the longer he sat on that throne, the darker it grew.

Footfalls sounded behind him. "There you are," he said without

looking back.

"Are you going to lay waste to Kunlun Taxue Palace?" Chu Wanning's voice echoed faintly in the grand hall.

"And what if I am?"

A pause. "Have you forgotten your promise to me? You swore you wouldn't seek Xue Meng's life."

Mo Ran's voice was even. "Shizun has come all this way and hasn't even stopped to ask after my injuries, or whether I'm cold standing out in this wind. He only cares who I'm going to kill."

"Mo Weiyu, I came to tell you to stop doing things you'll live to regret."

"*Heh*, regret? Shouldn't you be the one who feels regret? You already shattered your core trying to stop me from razing Rufeng Sect. Now I'm going to raze Taxue Palace, and you're just an ordinary person, without the strength to oppose me. Don't you *regret* not minding your own business back then?"

Mo Ran turned to glance at him over his shoulder, a flicker in his eyes and a cruel smile tugging at the corners of his lips. "Chu Wanning, you're a worthless cripple. How are you going to stop me? What do you have left?"

Chu Wanning could find no words for a long while. Maybe because he really did have nothing left.

A deafening clap of thunder suddenly split the skies, and rain poured forth, streaming down the roof and spilling from the eaves. Finally, Chu Wanning closed his eyes. When he opened them again, he only said, quiet, "Don't go."

Mo Ran turned on his heel with a swish of black robes. Against a backdrop of torrential rain and freezing wind in ash-gray skies,

he looked at Chu Wanning within the hall. “And why shouldn’t I go? I already gave Xue Meng his chance back then. You submitted to me for his sake, and I kept my word and spared his life in exchange for your body—but now *he’s* the one after *my* life. So tell me, why shouldn’t I go?”

Chu Wanning looked at him in silence.

“Well? You’ve nothing to say?” Mo Ran scoffed. “Go on—berate me, curse me out, say something. Chu Wanning, what happened to all that might of yours? I know Xue Meng’s your favorite, your prized disciple; he’s earnest and sincere, and I’m no more than mud on the sole of his boot.”

“That’s enough.” Chu Wanning’s brows were knitted tight on his pale face, as if trying to suppress some emotion.

“It is *not* enough! How could it be?” The sight of Chu Wanning’s distress filled Mo Ran’s heart with a savage glee. Anger, ecstasy, hatred, and jealousy scorched his heart with their intensity, and his eyes glinted as he paced back and forth.

“There’s no second chance, Chu Wanning, there’s no second chance for him. I’m going to kill him, and I’m going to skin him for a rug, drink wine from his skull! I’ll scoop his insides out, chop him up, and stew him! You can’t stop me! Chu Wanning, you can’t stop me!” The more he raved, the more enraptured he grew. His eyes reddened; he was frenzied, crazed.

“Snap out of it!” Suddenly a hand was fisted in the collar of his robes, and another struck him hard across the face. Chu Wanning was so close that Mo Ran could see the quiver of his eyelashes and the shining tears in his eyes. “Mo Ran, wake up already. Wake up…”

“I *am* awake!” The burn of that slap on his cheek drove him only further into insanity. He glared at Chu Wanning’s face and his anger

flared. “I’m perfectly fucking awake! You’re the one who’s asleep! Are you blind?!” Mo Ran shoved Chu Wanning away and tore open the collar of his robes to reveal the bloodstained bandages across his chest. “Are you blind, Chu Wanning!” he roared, jabbing at his own chest, and when even that wasn’t enough, ripped the gauze away completely to expose the bloody mess beneath.

“Who do you think did this? Your perfect little disciple, Xue Meng! If he had aimed his Longcheng just a hair to the side, I’d be dead! So you tell me why the *fuck* I should let him go! As far as you’re concerned, his life is a life, but mine counts for nothing. Is that it?!” In his fury, Mo Ran grabbed Chu Wanning’s hand and pressed it to his bloody wound. “Didn’t you want to stop me? Here’s your chance; go on then, dig out my heart! Chu Wanning, why don’t you just dig out my fucking heart?!”

Chu Wanning was silent. The tips of his fingers trembled, cold as ice.

Mo Ran glared at him, furiously, ruthlessly, the veins at his neck throbbing. “Go on,” he rasped, his voice raw, “dig it out.”

The torrent of rain against the roof was frenzied madness. Silence reigned. Neither moved.

After an interval, Mo Ran finally released Chu Wanning’s hand and, breathing low and harsh, declared in a deep voice, “Xue Ziming and Mei Hanxue’s lives are mine.”

Chu Wanning said nothing.

“Go ahead and hate me, Shizun,” he said. “My life’s already come to this anyway. *Our* lives have already come to this. None can turn back now, so we might as well press on in this darkness. I’m merely dragging some old friends along for company on my way to hell.”

That day, Chu Wanning had gazed at the back of Mo Ran’s black robes as he stalked away. He finally spoke: “Mo Ran, if you destroy

Taxue Palace and kill Xue Meng, I will end my life in front of you. I have nothing left to barter with, but at the very least I can still choose death."

When he heard those words, Mo Ran paused. He turned to look over his shoulder, and a smile spread across his handsome face as he stood against that dreary backdrop of wind and rain. "So long as this venerable one draws breath, you'll not find death so easily."

Chu Wanning only looked at him.

"Lest you forget, even when all the blood had drained from your body, I still snatched you back from the gates of death. You'll be spending the rest of this life with me, no matter how much you disgust me."

After venting his madness, Mo Ran gradually regained his usual placid demeanor, cold and threatening. "My dear shizun, just behave yourself and wait here at Sisheng Peak. When I capture Xue Meng, I'll haul him back here so he can take a good long look at the god he frets over night and day writhing under me like a wanton little slut. In consideration of our shared past, it's only right that I grant him the courtesy of full comprehension before he dies, after all."

But, counter to all of Mo Ran's expectations, Chu-zongshi was still Chu-zongshi.

One month later, Mo Ran stood proudly before Heavenly Lake at the summit of Kunlun Mountain and did exactly as he said he would. He captured Mei Hanxue and Xue Meng and bound them to pillars of ice, then used the Zhenlong Chess Formation to induce the thousands of souls at Taxue Palace to slaughter one another as the two looked on. The snowy mountain, once pristine and majestic, was dyed crimson in an instant. Blood streamed into Heavenly Lake and seeped into the ground.

Mo Ran sat calmly before the palace gates, eating grapes fetched by the servants and smiling as he oversaw the scene of destruction. “Mengmeng, do you like it?” He glanced at Xue Meng, whose eyes were glazed and unfocused.

Xue Meng remained silent and unresponsive, as if struck deaf.

Pleased, Mo Ran smiled still more affectionately and said, “Your cousin staged this show just for you. Are you enjoying it?”

A faint murmur: “Spare Taxue Palace.”

Mo Ran blinked. “What?”

“Spare Taxue Palace.” Xue Meng’s usually bright gaze was empty. “Let them go. Let Mei Hanxue go. I was the one who tried to kill you. Kill me; leave everyone else out of it.”

Mo Ran couldn’t help but laugh. “Are you trying to negotiate with me?”

“No.” Xue Meng’s eyes were hollow. “I’m begging you.”

The darling of the heavens had said, *I’m begging you*. Mo Ran’s eyes gleamed, the demon in his heart reveling at these words. Faintly amused, he gripped Xue Meng by the jaw and forced him to look up at him. Yet before he could speak, a burst of radiant green lit up the skyline.

“What’s going on?”

His retinue had no chance to respond. A resplendent spiritual array flowed out over the towering summit to cover all the thousands of miles of Kunlun Mountain.

And there above the array stood Chu Wanning, his robes white as snow fluttering lightly among the clouds. A peculiarly shaped guqin hung in the air before him. It was black from end to end, with a tail that curved upward and ended in a flourish of blooming branches, each

adorned with dew-laden haitang blossoms that glowed with a luminous radiance.

This was Chu Wanning's third holy weapon: Jiuge.

Chapter 100:
Shizun's Last Words

MO RAN'S BLOOD ran cold.

He had only seen Chu Wanning's guqin Jiuge once in his life, when he'd summoned it amidst their previous life-or-death battle. Then, its chords had split the skies and sundered the clouds. Every entity under the control of the Zhenlong Chess Formation, from the living people to the beasts and spirits, had recovered their consciousness at the sound of Jiuge's chords. One song had thrown Mo Ran's million-strong army of chess pieces into utter disarray.

Even so, summoning a holy weapon required the use of one's spiritual core and consumed a great deal of spiritual energy. Chu Wanning couldn't even call Tianwen anymore—how had he suddenly managed to call forth Jiuge, a weapon even more powerful?

The confrontation above Heavenly Lake that day had been no less fierce than the deathmatch betwixt master and disciple years before. Yet Mo Ran's memory of it was a muddy blur—because that bloody battle had left him without a single person by his side he could talk to.

Truth be told, even up until his death in the last lifetime, Mo Ran never had figured out how Chu Wanning was able to summon Jiuge using only the strength of his soul. It was a kind of connection not known to exist between any holy weapon and its master. But Chu Wanning had managed it.

That day, Mo Ran's Zhenlong chess pieces had crumbled to dust one after another at the thrum of the guqin. Jiuge's strength was somehow even purer and more indomitable than the first time he'd

witnessed it all those years ago—so much so that he suspected Chu Wanning's spiritual core hadn't been shattered at all, that he had merely been faking it all those years, had endured the indignities and bided his time, all for the chance to take his revenge in one fell swoop.

Later still, Mo Ran couldn't help thinking it would have been better that way. If Chu Wanning really had simply been pretending, maybe things wouldn't have come to this point.

If only.

Jiuge nullified Mo Ran's forbidden magic and returned awareness to the thousands of Taxue Palace cultivators slaughtering each other. It even shattered the enchanted ice pillars that bound Xue Meng and Mei Hanxue. Mo Ran leapt into the sky, robes flapping in the wind, his eyes flashing with anger and delight in equal measure. How many more surprising skills did Chu Wanning have up his sleeve? He couldn't wait to find out.

He landed atop of the barrier and strode across it to stand before Chu Wanning. That pair of slender, pale hands slowed, then laid themselves over the strings of the guqin, muting its sound. Chu Wanning lifted his head, his face the color of snow beneath sun. He spoke: "Mo Ran. Come closer."

Mo Ran walked over, though he couldn't say why he did so.

Chu Wanning lifted his fingers, and streams of jade-colored light arced toward Mo Ran's chest. He was startled at first, thinking that Chu Wanning meant to kill him. But the light didn't hurt at all. It only hovered before his chest, then melted slowly into his skin and flesh, suffusing him with untold warmth.

"I've healed the wound Xue Meng gave you." Chu Wanning breathed a soft sigh. "So let him off, Mo Ran. If even he's gone, when you want to reminisce about the past, who will you go to…"

Mo Ran was still processing the meaning behind these words when the sturdy barrier beneath his feet winked out of existence, along with Chu Wanning's Jiuge. He swiftly raised his hand to call Bugui so as to maintain his footing between the clouds. But Chu Wanning fell, gentle as a wilted leaf, as if his playing had exhausted the last of his strength.

"Wanning!" Mo Ran's expression shifted instantly. He urged his blade down, down, catching Chu Wanning in his arms moments before he plunged into the icy waters of Heavenly Lake. "Chu Wanning! You—you…"

Chu Wanning's eyes were closed. Blood trickled from his nose, his mouth, his eyes, his ears. This man had ever valued his dignity. Even in the years he was imprisoned within Wushan Palace, he had kept his back ramrod straight and rarely presented himself as aught other than prim and pristine. But now he bled from all seven orifices of his face, and his usually clear and refined countenance was a disheveled mess.

Chu Wanning swallowed a mouthful of blood. "You said that life or death is not up to me…but you see, Mo Ran…" His voice was hoarse. "You've underestimated your shizun after all. If I've made up my mind to leave, you can't stop me…no matter how you try…"

"Shizun… Shizun…" Mo Ran stared at him, feeling a chill wash over his heart, feeling his scalp go numb as he called out, helpless.

Chu Wanning smiled, his expression almost relieved. "I've held onto life these past few years because I didn't want to give up, always thinking…thinking that I'd just keep you company a little longer, try to teach you…not to commit any more sins. But now… Now…"

Mo Ran trembled as he held the man in his arms. He suddenly felt terrified.

Terrified.

Such an emotion had been no part of him for more than ten years,

but now it rushed back in a wave, nearly carving out his heart.

"Now I see that, perhaps, it will take my death for you to…stop doing evil…" He fell silent, as if in immense pain. Summoning Jiuge had been more than his body could withstand. His insides were ripping apart; another mouthful of blood spilled from his lips. Mo Ran, cradling him in his arms, touched down on the shore of Heavenly Lake. He channeled spiritual energy into Chu Wanning's chest without pause, his expression crazed and anguished.

But that powerful stream of spiritual energy only sank uselessly into Chu Wanning's body, like water through a sieve. Mo Ran panicked. Taxian-jun clutched the man in his arms tight to himself, trying and failing, again and again, to pass him spiritual energy.

"It's useless. Mo Ran, I used the last of my life to summon Jiuge. This is the end for me. But if you…yet have any clarity in your heart, then please…forgive…"

Forgive whom?

Xue Meng? Mei Hanxue? Kunlun Taxue Palace, or the entire cultivation world? Yes, yes… He'd forgive them all! So long as Chu Wanning lived, so long as this man he hated to his very core didn't die like this.

Chu Wanning raised a trembling hand, and a cold fingertip— as if out of pity, but also almost tender—poked lightly at Mo Ran's forehead. "Then please forgive…forgive yourself…"

The ferocity on Mo Ran's face froze in a rictus.

Forgive whom… As he lay dying, just whom was he worrying over?

Forgive…yourself…

Was that what he'd said?

As he held Chu Wanning, Taxian-jun was at something of a loss, but also somewhat delighted; wracked by misery, but also perfectly content.

"Forgive myself?" Mo Ran muttered, his eyes bloodshot. "Your last wish is for me to forgive myself?" He burst into laughter, and the sound pierced the skies like a raging inferno, burning away all reason and rationality. "Ha ha ha—*ha ha ha ha ha*—forgive *myself*? Chu Wanning, you're even crazier than me! How naïve—ha ha ha ha—" The slopes of Kunlun Mountain echoed with his deranged, miserable laughter. Twisted, unrecognizable, terrifying.

Chu Wanning swallowed another mouthful of blood, surrounded by the sound of Mo Ran's insanity. Had he still possessed the strength, his expression would have been one of anguish. But he no longer even had the wherewithal to furrow his brows. Only that pair of phoenix eyes —those eyes that had been at times sharp, or resolute, or harsh, or gentle—were now filled with sorrow.

Clear as the snow over Heavenly Lake, clouded as the frost limning the roof tiles.

Slowly, Chu Wanning's eyes grew unfocused, and his pupils dilated. Slowly, what had once been bright and sharp as lightning could no longer see distinctly. After a spell, he said in a quiet voice, "Don't laugh anymore, I can't bear to see you like this…"

Mo Ran had no reply.

"Mo Ran, everything that happened in this life…it's all because I failed to teach you well, because I called you vile and beyond remedy. It was I who wronged you. I won't blame you, in life or in death…" No color remained on Chu Wanning's bloodless face; even his lips were a pale blue. He lifted his gaze, with great effort, to look at Mo Ran. He wanted to cry, but instead, it was blood that flowed from his eyes and

slid down his cheeks. Chu Wanning wept. “Do you truly hate me so much…that you won’t grant me a moment of peace…even at the very end…? Mo Ran, Mo Ran…don’t do this anymore. Wake up, turn back… Turn back…”

Wake up…

Chu Wanning told Mo Ran to wake up. But he himself, his hollow eyes wide open, sank into an endless slumber.

Mo Ran didn’t believe—he refused to believe—that Chu Wanning could just die like this. That the great zongshi of an era, that high and lofty man, his shizun, the person he despised more than anyone, could die just like this. Lying in his arms at the edge of Heavenly Lake dyed red with blood. Growing cold bit by bit, cold as frost, frozen like ice.

Chu Wanning’s face was awash in blood. Mo Ran stared for a time with his head bowed, then raised his sleeve to wipe it clean. But there was too much blood. The more he wiped, the more he dirtied that once clear, clean face. Mo Ran pressed his lips together and wiped harder. All he got in return was a face smeared with gore, Chu Wanning’s features nearly unrecognizable.

At last, he stopped laughing. Closing his eyes, he murmured quietly, “You won this time, Chu Wanning. I couldn’t stop you from dying.” He paused, then opened his eyes again. They were deep and dark, yet within that abyss, a fire burned. “But you’ve underestimated me, too,” he continued. “I can’t stop you if you don’t wish to live, but neither can you stop me if I don’t wish you to die.”

Mo Ran brought Chu Wanning back to Sisheng Peak. He said not a word about his death.

By then, he was already immensely powerful, more than capable of staving off decay from a dead body indefinitely. Thus, he kept Chu Wanning’s body at the Red Lotus Pavilion and forced him to “live on” in

this manner. He simply couldn't accept that he had killed the last person in the world who still cared about him. So long as he could keep Chu Wanning's body from turning to ash, so long as he could still look at him every day, he could go on believing that Chu Wanning wasn't dead. There would still be a place for him to unload his deranged hatred, a place for him to entrust his twisted love.

Taxian-jun had finally gone completely insane.

After Chu Wanning departed, Mo Ran would visit the Red Lotus Pavilion every day, without exception, to look upon his corpse. At first, his eyes would flash with malice, and he would spit and curse before that body, saying, "Chu Wanning, this is what you deserve."

"You cared for every person under the sun but me, you hypocrite."

"What kind of master are you? I must've been fucking blind back then to take you as my master! You bastard!"

Later, he would ask relentlessly, every day, "Why're you still asleep? When are you gonna wake up?"

"I've already let Xue Meng go, is that not enough for you? Get up already."

Whenever he said such things, the servants accompanying him wondered if he had truly cracked and gone mad.

His wife, Song Qiutong, wondered the same. The prospect frightened her, and consequently, as she lay beside Mo Ran after a rare night of intimacy, she seized the chance to say, "A-Ran, the dead won't come back. I know you're sad, but…"

"Who's sad?"

Song Qiutong paused. She was adept at reading faces, even more so after the years she'd spent at Mo Ran's side. Her every step was careful, like treading on thin ice. When she saw his ill temper, she fell

silent at once and lowered her eyes, saying, “This one misspoke.”

But this time, Mo Ran didn’t let her off so easily. “No, no,” he pressed, narrowing his eyes. “You’ve already spit it out, so let’s have it. Go on, tell me: Who’s sad?”

“Your Majesty…”

Mo Ran’s dark eyes rolled with thunder. He abruptly sat up and seized Song Qiutong by her delicate neck. With one hand, he lifted the woman he had just lain with and threw her off the bed.

His face had twisted into something dangerous and bestial. “What do you mean the dead won’t come back—who’s dead? Who’s not coming back?” Mo Ran pushed each word past gritted teeth, aggressive and emphatic. “No one’s dead, no one needs to come back, and no one is sad!”

Song Qiutong’s lips quivered. She wanted to protest, but no sooner had she uttered the words “Red Lotus Pavilion”—just that half of a sentence—than Mo Ran saw red.

“What are you trying to say? There’s no one at the Red Lotus Pavilion but Chu Wanning, and he’s asleep! What exactly are you trying to suggest?! Bitch!”

The sight of his terrible rage made Song Qiutong’s heart lurch. At this rate, she was unsure what he might do in his lunacy. Thus she threw caution to the wind and gambled it all, raising her voice to say, “Your Majesty, that man lying in the Red Lotus Pavilion is already dead, yet you wallow there every day. How can…how can this one not worry?”

She chose her words carefully to evade blame, framing her own selfish desire as concern for Mo Ran.

Mo Ran stared at her, and his breathing gradually evened, as if her words had gotten through to him on some level. He calmed his rage,

then took a moment to steady himself. “I’ve made you worry,” he said.

Song Qiutong heaved a sigh of relief. “This one wishes only for Your Majesty’s well-being, and would gladly die for it. Your Majesty is deeply compassionate, but you must not be so despondent.”

“Then tell me, how do you think this venerable one should be?”

“Forgive this one for saying so, this one only means well for Your Majesty, but it’s time to bury Chu…Chu-zongshi. He’s already gone, and keeping his empty body around like this will only cause Your Majesty more pain.”

“And? You have more to say, do you not? Might as well get it all off your chest.”

When she saw his expression relax, Song Qiutong’s heart, which had leapt up into her throat, settled back in its place in her chest. She lowered her lashes and tilted her head slightly; she knew she looked most like Shi Mingjing this way.

Song Qiutong was perfectly aware that Shi Mingjing was Mo Weiyu’s weakness. What she couldn’t understand was why, no matter how she dressed like him or carefully imitated his demeanor, she still couldn’t arouse Mo Ran’s interest. Although this temperamental man enjoyed her company, he only ever touched her when he was very low or very drunk. Song Qiutong suspected that perhaps Mo Ran wasn’t really into women. Whatever the reason, it definitely wasn’t because he wasn’t into Shi Mingjing—all of Sisheng Peak knew that the man who had died many years ago was Emperor Taxian-jun’s true love.

Compared to that, what the hell was Chu Wanning?

Song Qiutong believed he was nothing more than a plaything on which Taxian-jun vented his lust, a plaything he’d already grown tired of fucking, at that. Chu Wanning may have traded his life for Mo Weiyu’s disquietude and remembrance, but she was certain it was at

most a momentary guilt, a temporary disruption to routine. She was confident in her face—this face that looked so much like Shi Mingjing's. That person in the Red Lotus Pavilion, neither living nor dead, could never outmatch her on this basis alone.

But Mo Ran couldn't be allowed to persist in this insanity. The world these days was in chaos, wars springing up left and right, and she was terrified that she might have hitched her horse to the wrong wagon. She wasn't young anymore; if Mo Ran were to lose his standing, she was unlikely to find another sky-reaching tree she could climb to the top. So she sincerely, wholeheartedly, hoped that Mo Ran would pull himself together and cease his madness.

She mulled it over, weighing the risks against the rewards. In the end, she summoned up the courage to say, "And once Chu-zongshi is gone, there will be none worthy of the Red Lotus Pavilion."

"Right. Go on."

"This one thinks, with that being the case, the pavilion will only serve to remind Your Majesty of the past, so…"

"So?" Mo Ran narrowed his eyes.

"So perhaps it would be best to seal away the Red Lotus Pavilion after this. A pavilion with only one master makes for a good tale."

Chapter 101:
Shizun, the Last Flame in This World

MO RAN SAID NOTHING for a long while. Then he smiled brightly. "A pavilion with only one master would make a good tale, huh. Well said."

His shapely feet trod unhurriedly across the ice-cold stone of the floor, the blue vein across the top flexing as he came to a stop before Song Qiutong. Mo Ran lifted one foot and tipped Song Qiutong's chin up with his toes, compelling her to meet his gaze. "You've been keeping all this bottled up for quite some time, hm?" He looked down upon her terror-stricken face with a smile. "Empress Song, you know, there *are* a number of things I've never asked you about. Since you're pouring your heart out today, why don't we just have it all out, hm? Come, let's have a nice chat.

"We can start with the most recent," Mo Ran continued. "The day I set out for Taxue Palace, I clearly remember locking Chu Wanning in the residential palace before leaving. So tell me, how was it that he appeared at Kunlun Mountain? Who let him out and allowed him to come find me?"

Song Qiutong's entire body shuddered. "I don't know!" she exclaimed. In her panic to explain herself, she even forgot to refer to herself as *this one*, slipping into *I* instead.

Mo Ran smiled. "All right, you don't know that one. Next, then. The year I made you empress, I also entrusted you with the management of Sisheng Peak. Afterward, I had to travel to Yin Mountain to take care of some business. Chu Wanning had been disobedient at the time, so I

had him locked in the water prison to reflect on his actions."

Song Qiutong's face grew pale at his mention of this matter, and her lips began to quiver.

"You used the excuse of a prison inspection and went to visit him, but he thoroughly scorned you."

"Y-yes," Song Qiutong said in a rush. "But Your Majesty…A-Ran, I told you about this incident back when it happened. Chu-zongshi dismissed me in such a disparaging manner, and then proceeded to insult not only myself but Your Majesty as well. I couldn't contain my anger at the time… I…"

"This venerable one knows." Mo Ran's smile was faint. "You couldn't contain your anger at the time. But Chu Wanning had committed grave crimes, and his punishment couldn't be increased without this venerable one's permission. So you carried out a piece of minor discipline and had all ten of his nails pulled out and stinging thorns inserted into the tip of each finger."

Song Qiutong's eyes filled with horror as she scrambled to say, "Your Majesty, when you returned, you praised me for doing well!"

Mo Ran continued to smile. "Oh…? Did I?"

"You… You said that foul-mouthed people should be treated just so, and you even told this one that the punishment was rather light, that if he should speak rudely again in the future, t-to break his fingers…" Her voice trailed off until, in the end, faced with the terrifying smile on Mo Ran's face, she collapsed to the ground in tears. "A-Ran…"

Mo Ran sighed softly. He smiled. "Qiutong, that was so long ago. This venerable one no longer remembers what he said or didn't say back then."

Song Qiutong held her tongue. She had by now guessed Mo Ran's intent, but her body still shuddered violently at his words.

“This venerable one’s been having dreams lately. Dreams about that day, returning from Yin Mountain and arriving at the water prison to find him with both hands festering and covered in blood…” Mo Ran spoke slowly, but his voice tightened toward the end, and a cold light flashed in his eyes. “This venerable one was not happy.”

“Your Majesty, Your Majesty…” Song Qiutong repeated helplessly. “No, A-Ran… Let me explain—please calm down and let me explain…”

“This venerable one was not happy.” Mo Ran continued as if he hadn’t heard a word, lowering his expressionless face to look coolly at the woman huddled on the floor. “Indulge me a bit, won’t you?”

Song Qiutong had spent these years at Mo Ran’s side with her life on the line, like sleeping beside a ferocious tiger. Nevertheless, when she saw Mo Ran’s countenance like frost and snow, paired with such an imperious request, Song Qiutong broke out in gooseflesh, and her scalp went numb. She could smell the scent of the oncoming storm. She lifted her deep brown eyes and peered meekly up at him as she crawled forward on all fours to nestle herself by his ankles. “Of course, anything A-Ran says. What can I do to make A-Ran happy? I’ll definitely… definitely…”

Mo Ran leaned over and gripped her jaw, wrenching her face upward. He wore a lovely, innocent smile, just like the one he’d worn when he first laid eyes on her at Rufeng Sect. Then, twin pools of sweet dimples had adorned his cheeks as he tugged at her sleeve and said, *Xiao-Shimei, what’s your name? Aiya, don’t be afraid, I won’t hurt you. Talk to me, okay?*

She shuddered. After so many years, yet with practically the same expression and the same tone, he said something else altogether:

“Qiutong, this venerable one knows you mean it, that you’ll do anything to make this venerable one happy…” His words were sweet

and gentle, and his fingertip caressed her soft lips. The part of her that looked most like Shi Mingjing.

Mo Ran's lashes trembled lightly as he stared calmly at those petal-like lips. Finally, he said, "Then you may go wait for this venerable one on the road to hell."

Song Qiutong froze.

"Okay?" he asked gently.

The tears that spilled from Song Qiutong's eyes were not from sadness, but from fear. She'd known the instant Mo Ran brought up her past abuse of Chu Wanning that this was going to end badly for her, but she'd thought the worst that could happen would be punishment by the rod or the loss of her title. She did not have the courage to even imagine that Mo Ran would actually…

That he'd actually! That he could actually bear to—!

He…he…

Madman.

He's gone mad…he's gone mad…

Mo Ran threw his head back and laughed in a low voice. His laughter grew increasingly arrogant, increasingly unrestrained. He laughed as he kicked open the door of the residential palace, laughed as he strode outside. He had always trod with abandon, had trampled countless lives. Now it was her turn.

He's gone mad…he's gone mad! Mo Weiyu has really gone mad!

Song Qiutong sank to her knees on that ice-cold floor of stone and golden bricks. The ardor of intimacy within the residential palace had yet to dissipate, but the fires of hell had begun to burn. With her mouth hanging slack and her head tipped backward, she struggled to look at the sky outside the palace.

Dawn was breaking, and the sky was the color of blood. Her bloodshot eyes were dyed crimson. In the distance, she heard Mo Ran call, so casual he might have been ordering his dinner for the day: "Guards, take the empress away."

"Your Majesty!" came the panicked reactions of the retinue outside. "Your Majesty, this…"

"Toss her in the cauldron. Fry her alive."

Song Qiutong suddenly couldn't hear anything more. Like she had sunk deep into the sea, she couldn't hear anything more.

"Fry her alive. Fry her alive, it'll be a lively good time that way. Ha ha… *Ha ha ha*…" He walked farther and farther away, yet the sound of his laughter and shouting lingered over Sisheng Peak like a high-flying eagle, wheeling across the sky.

The rising sun painted a long shadow behind him, a lonely figure on the ground. Ever so slowly, he walked. At first, the silhouettes of two youths seemed to walk beside him, and a tall man in white robes. Then the two silhouettes disappeared, leaving only the man in white robes to accompany him.

He walked on, and the white-robed man, too, vanished into the golden dawn.

The rising sun was pure and unblemished, and it claimed those who were likewise pure and unblemished—leaving only him, alone in hell, drowning in an ocean of blood, sinking into the masses of ghosts and fiends.

Only him, all alone, growing lonelier and colder the farther he walked.

He walked until he felt like he was dead, that he had already died… Becoming more deeply deranged with every step.

Mo Ran remembered, in the year before he took his own life, that when he looked into the copper mirror, he sometimes couldn't even recognize the monster staring back at him.

He remembered the night before he died, when he sat in the bamboo pavilion at the Red Lotus Pavilion with only an old servant to keep him company.

"Liu-gong," he had asked lazily, "what kind of person did this venerable one used to be?" He carried on without waiting for an answer, staring at his own reflection in the pond. "This venerable one didn't used to wear his hair like this when he was young, much less this tasseled crown, right?"

Liu-gong sighed. "It is as Your Majesty says. The crown and hairstyle were both the recommendation of Empress Song after your ascension to the throne."

"Oh, you mean Song Qiutong?" Mo Ran sneered and tipped his head back to take a gulp of pear-blossom white wine. "I actually listened to her suggestions back then, huh?"

Maybe it was because the end was nigh, and there was no more need to worry about accidentally pricking the emperor's sore spot with a stray word and losing his head. Whatever the reason, the drooping old man spoke the candid truth.

"Yes," Liu-gong said. His eyes were downcast and his hands tucked into his sleeves. "When Your Majesty first ascended the throne, Empress Song was quite favored. There was a period of time when Your Majesty did aught the empress asked. Did…Your Majesty forget?"

"Forget?" Mo Ran chuckled. "I didn't forget. How could I possibly forget."

After he'd married Song Qiutong, someone had whispered to her that the reason he favored her was solely due to her likeness to the

deceased Shi Mingjing. She was a clever person. She spared no effort inquiring after Shi Mei's mannerisms and bearing, then subtly exhibited the same in their everyday life as husband and wife, so that it seemed almost like the dead had come back to life.

How could he possibly forget?

Mo Ran smiled mirthlessly, then suddenly plucked the crown from atop his head and tossed it into the pond without bothering to look where it landed. As startled koi fish leapt from the water and the visage reflected therein became warped and distorted, he loosened his topknot and let his inky hair fall. He leaned by the pondside, letting the mercurial light of the rippling, sparkling waters dance across his face. "There we go. The crown's gone, and the hair's down. Old Liu, help me think. What more does this venerable one need to do to look as he did before the enthronement?"

"Um…"

"A hair tie, right?" Mo Ran examined his reflection. "That blue hair tie commonly worn by disciples of Sisheng Peak. Are there any left in the palace?"

"There are. When you shed your disciple uniform to ascend the throne, Your Majesty charged this old one with its safekeeping. I will go fetch it if that is Your Majesty's wish."

"Excellent. Go on then, bring the whole set. The hair tie, too."

Liu-gong left and returned bearing a stack of old clothes. Mo Ran sat up. As the tips of his fingers brushed the familiar texture of the cotton and hemp, snatches of the past fluttered up like dried leaves to land on his tattered heart. Now eager, he took up an outer robe and put it on.

But the clothing of his youth was far too small; it wouldn't fit no matter how he tugged or pulled. He flew into a rage: "Why doesn't it

fit?! Why can't I go back?!" He paced like a trapped beast in a cage, insanity in every line of his face and his eyes flickering with a dangerous light. "This is this venerable one's clothing! Isn't it?! Did you fetch the wrong set?! If it *is* this venerable one's clothing, why would it not fit! *Why would it not fit*—!"

The old servant was by now accustomed to seeing his master in the grip of madness. Liu-gong used to think Mo Ran's moods terrifying. But today, for some reason, he found the man before him pitiful instead. He wasn't looking for clothes—he was looking for himself, the Mo Ran of the past who could never return. "Your Majesty," the old man sighed, soft, "Let it go; you're not that young man of years gone anymore."

At these words, Mo Ran ceased his raging and fell silent. His head whipped around fiercely to glare at the old man's withered face. But he was unable to get a single word out, as if he were choking, and in the end only breathed harshly as he stared with red-rimmed eyes. It was several minutes before he finally managed, "I'm not…?"

"You're not."

A long pause. "I can't go back?"

"You can't go back."

For the first time, a childlike helplessness appeared on the face of that thirty-two-year-old man. He closed his eyes, the jut of his throat bobbing. The old servant stood to the side with his head bowed, thinking, *Once he opens his eyes, he'll surely bare his fangs and shred everything in his path with a snarl.*

But when Mo Ran opened his eyes again, they were wet with tears. Perhaps it was this that extinguished the inferno in his heart. Mo Ran opened his mouth and, in a voice hoarse and weary, murmured, "I see… I see… I can't go back… I can't go back…"

He set down the robe as if exhausted, took a seat by the stone table, and buried his face in his hands. A long moment passed before he said, “Then I’ll just tie up my hair.”

“Your Majesty, why do all this…”

“This venerable one’s life will soon end. Don’t want to be too lonely when the time comes.” His face remained in his hands as he spoke, his expression indiscernible. “I just want to change my clothes and feel like I still have old friends around for company.”

Liu-gong sighed. “That’s just make-believe.”

“Make-believe is fine,” Mo Ran replied. “Make-believe is better than nothing.”

He pulled his long hair back, wrapping the tie around it once, twice. Then he picked up a hair clasp with faded edges from the pile of old clothes, intending to pin it in his hair just as he had when he was young. But as he looked at his reflection in the water, his hand stilled.

Which side did the pin go in from again? Was it the left or the right?

He hadn’t used this hair clasp for many years; he could no longer remember. Mo Ran closed his eyes and asked, “Old Liu, do you know how I used to wear my hair?”

“To answer Your Majesty, this old one only came into the palace two years after your enthronement. This old one cannot answer you.”

“But I can’t remember,” Mo Ran insisted. “I need someone to tell me.”

Liu-gong remained silent.

“Where can I find someone who knows?” Mo Ran murmured. “Who can tell me what I used to look like…”

Old Liu heaved a lengthy sigh but couldn’t think of a single name.

Truthfully, Mo Ran also knew, in his heart, that the old man had no answer to give him. And so, he held that black hair clasp uncertainly to his left, then his right, before settling on the left side and pinning it there. “That seems right,” Mo Ran said. “Let me go ask him.”

He strode toward the inner recesses of the pavilion and came to the side of the red lotus pond where Chu Wanning’s body lay, looking for all the world as if he were merely asleep. Mo Ran settled himself down on the ground, then propped his cheek in one hand and said, “Shizun.”

The breeze carried with it the faint fragrance of the lotus blossoms. As he looked at that man lying with his eyes closed within the vibrant, intoxicating red of the pond, Mo Ran now found he had quite a lot he wanted to say, but at the same time, he didn’t know what to say at all.

When it came to Chu Wanning, Mo Ran seemed always to be full of emotions. But those emotions were too jumbled, contained too many flavors; amidst the sweet and the sour and the bitter and the spicy, he couldn’t tell if the greater part of what he felt toward this man was hatred, or something else. He really, honestly didn’t know how to behave toward this person.

He had once convinced himself that the sole reason he kept Chu Wanning around was to vent his hatred and sate his desires. But then Chu Wanning had died, and Mo Ran still kept this corpse that he could no longer even lie with. The grave had been dug, but Mo Ran couldn’t bear to bury him.

What use was there in keeping this cold, unmoving corpse that couldn’t speak? Even he didn’t really know. The two of them had been through too much, and whatever tiny, pure thing there had been at the start had been drowned to death long ago.

When Chu Wanning was still alive, the two rarely passed any peaceful, amicable days together. But now that Chu Wanning was gone, a kind of cruel gentleness grew between the living and the dead. Mo Ran visited him often, a jar of pear-blossom white wine in hand, and looked without saying much at all.

Now he was besieged on all sides and knew that his life was at an end. Dead as he was, Chu Wanning was the only person from his past; the last one left in this Sisheng Peak that looked the same but held none of the same people; the only one who had stayed beside him all this time.

Mo Ran suddenly wanted to have a nice, long heart-to-heart with this cold corpse. Chu Wanning was dead; he could neither protest nor berate him. No matter what Mo Ran said, his shizun would have no choice but to lie there and listen. Yet when Mo Ran tried to move his lips, his throat felt tight. In the end, he only managed to say one thing.

“Shizun, pay attention to me.”

Chapter 102:
Shizun's Shizun

SHIZUN, pay attention to me.

They were the words Mo Ran had spoken when they'd first met beneath the Heaven-Piercing Tower. At the time, Chu Wanning's eyes had been closed. When Mo Ran called to him, his lashes fluttered open.

These were also the words Mo Ran said when they parted for the last time at the Red Lotus Pavilion. At that time, Chu Wanning's eyes had also been closed. Mo Ran called to him, but he never again raised his head.

That one sentence drifted for half a lifetime, from the Heaven-Piercing Tower to the edge of the lotus pond, and finally settled into dust. All those years of hate and love scattered and went cold.

Mo Ran had finished his last jar of pear-blossom wine and descended from the southern tip of Sisheng Peak toward the eve of his final day. The next morning, the rebel army that charged into Wushan Palace discovered that Taxian-jun, that calamity upon the world for the past ten years, had taken his own life at the age of thirty-two.

Two lifetimes had passed.

Mo Ran opened his eyes. He had slept the night through under the flowering tree before the Heaven-Piercing Tower, and he woke up dazed and lost, unable to tell when he was. "Shizun…" he murmured absently, "pay attention to me…"

Only then did he remember that, in this lifetime as well, Chu Wanning was gone.

In his past life, Mo Ran had become accustomed to his every day being a bitter struggle. Then, Chu Wanning had been the one who had walked with him to the very end. He didn't want to be that vile person again in this life, but now, Chu Wanning wouldn't be around to see what became of him. Perhaps the heavens themselves couldn't bear it, or perhaps it was simply fate—Chu Wanning had grown disgusted beyond endurance with him in the past life, so in this one, he was the first to take his leave.

Mo Ran laid his arm across his eyes, holding back the tightness in his throat.

He heard Xue Zhengyong shouting frantically in the distance. His uncle was looking for him, calling, "Ran-er—where are you? Ran-er!"

Shi Mei was calling for him as well: "A-Ran, where are you… Hurry and come out…"

"Ran-er, come back and keep Yuheng company! Don't do anything stupid, Ran-er!"

Keep Yuheng company… Keep him company…

Mo Ran dragged himself up off the ground and staggered toward the voices. He couldn't collapse, he couldn't collapse—there was so much he still had to do. They still hadn't found the person behind all this, not to mention the Heavenly Rift could open again at any time. Sisheng Peak had suffered heavy losses in the catastrophe, and there were innumerable matters that needed to be seen to. Xue Meng was heartbroken from grief, so anguished he couldn't even rise. Mo Ran couldn't collapse too.

So Mo Ran endured it, and forced himself to pick up the pieces. He told himself, *It doesn't hurt, it doesn't hurt*. This wasn't the first time he'd lived through Chu Wanning's death. *It doesn't hurt.*

It doesn't hurt…

But how could it not hurt? Over three thousand steps Chu Wanning had crawled, carrying him on his back—how could it not hurt…

He'd drained his very last reserves of spiritual energy, he'd given it all to Mo Ran, how could it not hurt…

He had suffered an identical injury, but so as not to burden his disciple, he had adopted a heartless expression and left on his own. How could it not hurt…

And in the past life, Chu Wanning had also suffered the same injury as Shi Mei. It was just that he hadn't said anything about it. He hadn't said, and Mo Ran hadn't asked. He'd roared angrily at Chu Wanning, vented endless hatred on him, flung to the ground those wontons Chu Wanning, who had yet to recover from his own injuries, had worked so hard to make for him. Before his eyes, Chu Wanning had bent down, lowered his head, and then, one by one, had picked up each wonton and thrown them away.

How could it not hurt… How could it not have hurt?!

He had dug out Chu Wanning's heart! How could it have not hurt?! How could it…

Mo Ran couldn't take a step further. He stood in place for a long spell, trying to suppress these feelings, trying to rescue his calm. His entire body trembled. It hurt. He buried his face in his hands, bit down on his lip, and swallowed his sobs with the blood.

A very long time passed before he managed, just barely, to pull himself together. He lifted his head, his eyes red around the rims, and drew in a deep breath. Then, slowly, he walked down the steps.

He couldn't collapse.

"Uncle."

“Ran-er, where were you? You had me worried half to death! How am I gonna face Yuheng in the afterlife if something happens to you?”

“It was my fault,” Mo Ran said. “I’m okay now. Sorry to have made Uncle worry.”

Xue Zhengyong shook his head. He wasn’t quite sure what to say, so he only patted Mo Ran’s shoulder. After a long moment, he said, “It’s not your fault. It’s not your fault; you’re already so much stronger than Meng-er…” He sighed.

“Where’s Xue Meng?” Mo Ran asked hoarsely.

“Sick. He has a high fever. He just drank his medicine and went to sleep. He’s inconsolable when awake, crying all day… Sleep will do him some good.” Xue Zhengyong looked exhausted. “The Heavenly Rift of the Infinite Hells has the whole cultivation world in a state. Even the upper cultivation world is sending people to look into the matter now. But whoever’s behind it covered his tracks incredibly well; Butterfly Town was practically leveled in the bloody battle, and no clues were left to be found.”

Mo Ran wasn’t at all surprised to hear this. This individual’s abilities were clearly beyond what anyone, including himself, had anticipated. Someone who could take Chu Wanning’s life obviously wouldn’t be so careless as to leave traces. “What does the upper cultivation realm plan to do?”

“Representatives from each sect are holding a meeting at Spiritual Mountain to discuss the matter,” Xue Zhengyong replied. “I’d planned to set off for it tomorrow…but I’m worried about leaving when Meng-er is like this…”

He was right—even the world’s preeminent zongshi, Chu Wanning, had lost his life in the incident at Butterfly Town. Negligent as the upper cultivation world might be, they could no longer afford to

simply sit by and watch.

Who laid down the spells that opened the barrier? What is he after? What's his next move?

These questions circled in their hearts like vultures. Everyone wanted answers, but an extensive investigation had yielded none. They had no choice but to cooperate with one another.

"Don't worry, Uncle," Mo Ran said. "I'll help Aunt take care of things in the sect while you're gone."

"That's good, that's good…" Xue Zhengyong sighed. "I wish I didn't have to burden you with this…"

With Xue Zhengyong's departure and Xue Meng lost in his fugue, all the accumulated scrolls of paperwork and attendant tasks fell to Mo Ran. He threw himself wholeheartedly into the work without daring to rest for a moment. If he stopped to rest, stopped to think, the anguish and regret would drag him into the abyss and torture his broken soul. He wished he could bury his head in scrolls, day in and day out, if only so he could ignore the endless torment and guilt that wracked his heart.

When the Infinite Hells had opened, yin energy had flooded the mortal realm, and all manner of fiends, long suppressed, had seized the opportunity to escape and wreak havoc across the land. The letters of commission requesting aid from Sisheng Peak had practically piled up into a small mountain. Mo Ran busied himself taking care of it all, forgetting to sleep and skipping meals. He often stepped into Loyalty Hall at the break of dawn and stayed late into the night before returning to his quarters to rest.

But even buried in this ocean of paperwork, he would find himself pricked unawares by splinters of Chu Wanning left behind.

Qingjiang region has been troubled as of late, and most of the eighty-

two families in Fengling Village are old and ailing, with no means to defend themselves. We are fortunate to have a Holy Night Guardian automaton made by your esteemed sect's elder to fend off the fiends for now. But this is not a long-term solution, so we would like to request…

A drop of wax slid slowly down the candle, and the wick crackled. Mo Ran came to with a start; he had been staring vacantly at the letter for some time, his finger tracing the words *Holy Night Guardian* over and over. In his mind's eye, he saw Chu Wanning in the Red Lotus Pavilion, his hair pulled back in a ponytail and a sanding file held in his mouth as he poured his focus into oiling an automaton.

Mo Ran let out a long breath. He pressed his fingers to his forehead and rubbed lightly. Suddenly, he heard someone knocking.

"Shi Mei?"

The beautiful young man dressed in light, simple white robes entered balancing a tray. He set it down beside Mo Ran's scrolls, then rolled up his sleeves and stirred the candlelight back to brightness. "A-Ran," he said gently, "you've been working all day. Have something to eat."

"All right…" Mo Ran forced a smile and laid down his scroll, continuing to knead at the throbbing pain between his brows.

"I made a bowl of ginseng chicken soup and a few side dishes." Shi Mei set out the plates and felt the temperature through the side of the bowl. "Oh good, it's still warm."

As they ate, Shi Mei noticed a loose wisp of hair hanging before that handsome, weary face, and reached out to tuck it back in. "A-Ran."

"Hm?"

"That day…was there something you wanted to tell me?"

Mo Ran's thoughts were scattered, and it took him a moment to understand what Shi Mei was asking. He glanced at Shi Mei. "Which day?"

Shi Mei pursed his lips and lowered his gaze. He was silent for a time, then answered, "The day of the Heavenly Rift."

Mo Ran waited for him to continue.

"You said you were going to go help…help Shizun mend the Heavenly Rift, and that there was something—that if you still felt like telling me when you came back, then…" Shi Mei bowed his head, and his voice trailed off. In the glow of the candle, his delicate, snow-white ears seemed a little pink.

Mo Ran stared for a long time but couldn't manage a single word. He knew—without a doubt—that he loved Shi Mei dearly. But right now, in this moment, he really wasn't in the mood, not in the least. Mo Ran was shameless and unmannerly; he couldn't care less what others said, and things like morality and etiquette were thoroughly foreign to him.

But that didn't mean he was heartless.

A long second passed in silence. When Mo Ran finally spoke, his voice was soft. "Sorry. I feel really down right now, and I…don't think this is the right time. So, about that thing—I'll tell you some other time, okay?"

Shi Mei's head snapped up, his beautiful eyes startled.

Mo Ran squeezed out a chuckle and raised his hand. He hesitated a second, then patted Shi Mei's head. "I'm kind of dumb, and there have been so many things to take care of lately, I… I don't know when I'll have a quiet moment to gather my thoughts. I don't want to be careless about it."

Even the warmth of the candle couldn't conceal the gradual

blanching of Shi Mei's face. "Careless?" He paused, then smiled. "A-Ran, it was life or death back then. I would've thought anything you were going to say at a time like that was something you'd already given careful thought to."

"I have." Mo Ran furrowed his brow. "I've thought about it for a long time, and it's never changed, but…"

"But?" Shi Mei leaned forward.

Mo Ran hesitated. Eventually, he said, "But not right now." His hands clenched into fists in his sleeves. "Not right now, Shi Mei. You don't know yet, but it's something very important. I don't want to rush it and tell you at such a miserable time, I—"

"Young master!" A junior suddenly barged in unannounced. When he saw that the one managing sect matters in Loyalty Hall was Mo Ran, he hurriedly dipped his head in a bow and corrected himself: "Ah, Mo-gongzi."

At this interruption, the faint blush on Shi Mei's cheeks faded. He flicked his sleeves and sat back in his chair, taking on a mild, unassuming appearance.

Mo Ran looked up, oblivious to the shift in Shi Mei's demeanor. "What is it?"

"R-reporting in. There's an esteemed guest at the sect entrance."

"An esteemed guest?" Mo Ran echoed. "Anyone of note from the ten great sects is at Spiritual Mountain right now. Where'd this esteemed guest come from?"

The disciple seemed both fearful and excited; his face flushed and he stammered incoherently for a few seconds before he finally managed to blurt, "I-it's Master Huaizui of Wubei Temple!"

"What?!" Even the ex-Emperor Taxian-jun couldn't help but jump

to his feet.

Shi Mei was startled as well. “Master Huaizui?”

Mo Ran had good reason to be shocked—Master Huaizui was practically a legend in the cultivation world.

This man had long ago achieved enlightenment. By all rights, he ought to have ascended. But when the great gates of the heavenly realm had opened for him, he had pressed his palms together and said that he could not break with the mortal realm, could not let go of his lifelong obsession, and could not wash himself of past sins. In the end, the heavenly light dimmed, the lotus blossom wilted, and Master Huaizui had ambled away from immortality in his threadbare monk’s robes, his staff tapping lightly against the ground.

After declining his chance to ascend and become an immortal, he had gone into seclusion at Wubei Temple to reflect. A century passed in the blink of an eye. One hundred years since, the cultivation world had heard his name but never laid eyes on his person. The number of seniors still living who had met him before his seclusion could be counted on one hand.

In his past life, Mo Ran had turned the land upside down and still hadn’t been able to meet this Master Huaizui. Huaizui had been too, too ancient, and had passed away on a rainy spring day the year before Mo Ran climbed to the top of the human world. No one knew how old he’d been when he passed.

Yet how unexpected—in this reborn life, Master Huaizui had come calling in the dead of night of his own accord.

Innumerable thoughts flashed through Mo Ran’s mind in the space of an instant—though he didn’t yet know his business here, Mo Ran immediately recalled certain rumors about Master Huaizui.

Huaizui… Huaizui! How could he have forgotten about Master

Huaizui?!

When Shi Mei died in the last lifetime, Mo Ran had been ignorant; he'd no idea there was such a sage in the cultivation world. It was only later, when he was emperor, that he learned from his subordinates of the existence of one in this world who could wield Rebirth, one of the three forbidden techniques.

That person was Huaizui.

He had dispatched people to Wubei Temple at all speed to request the sage's presence, that he might recall Shi Mei's soul. But the people he sent returned with the news that the great master had already passed away, and with him, Mo Ran's last chance to revive Shi Mei.

But right now, this person of legend was still alive! *He was still alive!* How did he forget that! How *could* he forget?

Mo Ran's heart lurched, and he trembled all over. A blaze lit his eyes as he said hastily, "Hurry, invite the great master in!"

Before the disciple could respond, Mo Ran changed his mind. "Actually, I'll go welcome him in myself." But he'd taken only two steps when there was a sudden flash of yellow from without the hall.

Neither the candle nor its flame shuddered. There was no hint of a breeze. No one, not even Mo Ran with his keen eyes, had seen him enter. Yet a monk arrayed in a bamboo hat and threadbare monk's robes now stood commandingly inside Loyalty Hall. He had moved like lightning and stopped right in front of Mo Ran, who started at the sudden proximity.

"This one is already imposing so late at night and shall not trouble Mo-shizhu[9] so." A deep, mellow voice drifted out from beneath the bamboo hat, startling both Mo Ran and Shi Mei. How was this the voice of a hundred-year-old man?

Mo Ran had barely finished the thought when the monk removed

his bamboo hat. In the candlelit hall, he looked no more than thirty years of age, with a pleasant appearance and a mild demeanor. His eyes were bright and sharp, but rather than projecting menace, they were calm and lucid, like the reflection of light in water.

"You are…?"

The monk pressed his palms together and bowed low. "Amitabha,[10] this humble monk is Huaizui."

No one had expected Master Huaizui, who was a hundred years old at *least*, to look younger than Xue Zhengyong. For a beat, there was only stunned silence. But Mo Ran knew a thing or two when it came to cultivation. Huaizui was someone who had rejected ascension and chosen instead to remain in the mortal realm. The only difference between this man and an immortal was that final step of shedding his mortal body and undergoing the heavenly trial.[11] After following this line of reasoning to its conclusion, Mo Ran relaxed a little—though he still couldn't look away from Huaizui.

Huaizui didn't wish to disturb anyone else, so they sat down in Loyalty Hall just the three of them. Mo Ran poured tea for the great master with his own hand. Huaizui accepted and murmured his thanks but did not drink. He set the tea aside on the small sandalwood table and slowly raised his head.

He spoke in polite and mellow tones but cut straight to the point: "Mo-shizhu, pray forgive this humble monk for being so forward, but the reason for my visit today is a past acquaintance."

Mo Ran's hear began to race. His vision swam, and his fingers dug into the table's edge with such force he nearly cracked it. He stared intently at Master Huaizui's face as words from his past life whirled through his mind like drifting flakes of snow.

There's a rumor that someone has successfully used Rebirth, one of the

three forbidden techniques. But it's a rumor only; there's no knowing whether there's any truth to it…

Where is this Master Huaizui? I'll pay any price to bring Shi Mei back!

To answer Your Majesty, Huaizui…has already passed away, many years ago. He wrote nothing in all his life, and, regarding Rebirth, he said only that "To change fate is in defiance of Heaven's will, its dangers immeasurable." Other than that, he left nothing else…

The words streamed past his ears.

Master Huaizui had an unfathomable grasp of mortality and reincarnation.

Word has it that he had dealings with the ghost realm. If he yet lived, perhaps Mingjing-shixiong might be returned from the grave, but unfortunately…

Master Huaizui was like a ghost lingering in the world of the living. He undoubtedly had a hand in anything and everything to do with the yin and the yang.

Mo Ran drew in a deep breath and was surprised to find that his voice trembled faintly. "Past acquaintance… A past acquaintance…" he murmured, his own eyes locked with Master Huaizui's clear ones. Mo Ran's back was covered in a sheen of sweat. He asked in a voice so soft it was nearly inaudible, "Who is this past acquaintance?"

The monk rose slowly; in the low candlelight, no shadow pooled beneath his feet. The sleeves of his plain, thin yellow robe hung low. The robe was obviously worn, but was completely smooth and free of wrinkles as it drifted lightly in the breeze like the flickering outline of a ghost. This great master was certainly inscrutable.

Mo Ran could practically hear the pounding of his own heart in his ears. He unconsciously stood with Huaizui, and the two of them gazed at one another. "Great Master." If there had been a mirror before him

right now, he would have seen the light of hope that had dawned unbidden on his face, and the pleading look that followed in its wake. “Who is this past acquaintance…”

Was it him? Was it him?

Huaizui lowered his lashes and sighed as he pressed his palms together again. “My disciple Chu Wanning perished seven days ago. Tonight is the night his soul is due to return. This humble monk cannot bear to send off one so young, and comes to Sisheng Peak to beg Moshizhu’s pity: please return this old monk his disciple.”

Chapter 103:
Shizun, I'm Coming to Find You

SO IT WAS LIKE THAT. His disciple…

Mo Ran had never imagined that this exalted monk, someone practically indifferentiable betwixt human and ghost, was Chu Wanning's teacher. For a moment, he found himself unable to speak.

It was Shi Mei who reacted first, bending his head at once in a formal rite of respect. "I was unaware that the great master was thus related to our late master," he said in a deferential tone. "This humble one offers Huaizui-shizu his sincere greetings."

"There's no need to call me shizu," Master Huaizui replied. "Chu Wanning was expelled from the sect by this humble monk long ago."

"Ah!" Shi Mei's eyes widened slightly in surprise. "I see…" He was prudent by nature. Though he was curious, he understood from the faint wistfulness in Master Huaizui's expression that the monk had no wish to speak of it, and so asked no further.

But Mo Ran's thoughts were elsewhere; he pressed urgently, feeling as though his still-beating heart was being broiled in his chest. "Great Master, you said you came here for Shizun, so do you…do you have some means of bringing Shizun back?!"

"A-Ran…"

"Do you know how to bring him back?! Tell me the truth! Do you…do you know how…" The rapid pumping of his heart, coupled with exhaustion from days of overwork, made Mo Ran light-headed. His vision swam, and the rest of the sentence caught in his throat, impossible to speak—but the rims of his eyes grew red.

Master Huaizui sighed. “Mo-shizhu, pray take care. But yes, that is indeed why this old monk is here.”

Mo Ran’s face, once pale as paper, flushed with color. He stared fixedly at Master Huaizui, his bloodless lips quivering for a moment before he managed to continue. “D-do you…really…”

“This old monk would not disturb the two shizhu so late at night for a prank.”

Mo Ran still wanted to say more. His throat moved, but only a choked sob emerged.

A long interval passed in silence. “The Rebirth technique alters fate in defiance of heaven’s will, and is no simple matter,” Master Huaizui finally said. “This old monk owes Chu-zongshi much; if not, I would never have resorted to such measures. Visiting Sisheng Peak was a decision made after seven days of consideration.”

“Altering fate in defiance of heaven’s will…?” Mo Ran said, testing the words. After a second, he muttered miserably. “Altering fate in defiance of heaven’s will… If even a sinner like me was given the opportunity to alter my fate in defiance of heaven’s will, then surely a good person like him should be given the same chance?”

Half-crazed as he was in that moment, Mo Ran actually let slip his own alteration of fate in defiance of heaven’s will. It was only luck that he had been mumbling indistinctly, and no one caught the insinuation that he himself was reborn.

“Shizu,” said Shi Mei, “since it alters fate in defiance of heaven’s will, and Rebirth itself is a forbidden technique, I imagine it must be extremely difficult to perform, and may not necessarily succeed…right?”

“Correct,” Huaizui affirmed. “This technique involves not only the wielder and the deceased, but also requires a third person to locate the totality of the deceased’s soul. The journey to rebirth is rife with

hardships, and the slightest mistake could result in eternal damnation and complete shattering of the soul."

Shi Mei fell silent.

"For that reason, this old monk need not disturb anyone else, and came only to ask Chu-zongshi's three disciples if you would be willing to tread fire and flood and pass through untold dangers for him. If you are not willing, then even if this old monk opens the gate of rebirth, Chu Wanning will not be able to return."

Mo Ran had guessed most of this even before Huaizui's explanation. The reason the three forbidden techniques were forbidden was that, unlike ordinary magic, they required certain sacrifices and involved certain dangers. In the last lifetime, he had been willing to give his life for Shi Mei. In this one, he had already decided that, in order to repay his debt to Chu Wanning, he would again not hesitate.

Mo Ran wasn't heartless. It was just that, in the last lifetime, he had never been willing to give Chu Wanning even the tiniest piece of his heart.

In the glow of the candlelight, Mo Ran looked directly at Master Huaizui. "The great master needn't ask Xue Meng," he said. "Shizun died because of me. There's no need to involve anyone else in this matter. I, Mo Ran, am willing to shoulder all the dangers of this technique alone."

"A-Ran…" Shi Mei muttered, then turned to ask Huaizui, "Shizu's words are sobering indeed; what will the actual trial be like?"

"Although Mo-shizhu is willing to undertake the dangers himself," Huaizui said, "for the first step of this technique, the more people there are willing to take the risk, the more likely it is to succeed. So let's wait for Xue-shizhu to get here, and then I will explain to all three of you. This old monk already asked someone to call him when I first arrived."

He paused, then smiled at Shi Mei. “On a separate note, please remember not to refer to this old monk as shizu. As I mentioned earlier, this old monk no longer holds the position of Chu-zongshi’s shizun.”

Now that Mo Ran had calmed down somewhat, he had to ask: “Why did the great master expel our shizun from the sect?”

Shi Mei was flabbergasted. “A-Ran…”

“No matter, it’s not some unspeakable thing.” Huaizui sighed. “In this humble monk’s youth, he once received the care of a benefactor. However, my benefactor was ill-fated, and lost his life protecting others in a great calamity. It has been a hundred years hence, but the thought of it still makes this humble monk uneasy. Thus, the most important rule of our sect has always been that its disciples must focus solely on cultivation and, until and unless they reach enlightenment, are forbidden from setting foot in the outside world or meddling in matters thereof, so as to safeguard their own lives.”

Mo Ran considered it for a moment, then said, “Shizun couldn’t do it.”

“Indeed.” There was a bitter twist to Huaizui’s smile. “That little disciple of mine had a temperament much like my benefactor’s. He grew up in the temple, and though he had little in the way of experience, he possessed skill and talent in abundance. By all rights, he ought to have cultivated into ascension without incident. But the year he came of age, he happened to be at the foot of the mountain collecting ores, and came upon a group of fleeing refugees…”

Shi Mei sighed. “Shizun definitely wouldn’t just stand by and watch.”

Huaizui nodded. “Not only did he not stand by, after he escorted the refugees to safety and made arrangements for them, he left the mountain without permission to see for himself how people lived within

the lower cultivation realm."

Mo Ran and Shi Mei lapsed into silence. Sisheng Peak had been only recently established back then, and the situation in the lower cultivation realm had been far more chaotic than now. What Chu Wanning had seen there went without saying.

"When he returned, he told me that he wanted to put his cultivation training on hold so he could go down among the people to help the injured and save lives."

"Did you agree?" Shi Mei asked.

"No."

Shi Mei fell quiet.

"He was only fifteen then, with a pure, simple nature and a hot temper. It would've been far too easy for some malefactor to deceive him. How could I possibly allow him to go out on his own? Besides, his cultivation was high, but his constitution was poor, and all kinds of dangers and dangerous characters lurk in the world. As his master, this humble monk truly could not help but worry."

"But he didn't listen to you in the end," Mo Ran guessed.

"No, he didn't. We had a heated argument about it. He said, 'How can Shizun just sit there all day with his eyes closed trying to ascend while the common people suffer before our eyes?'"

"Ah!" Shi Mei exclaimed in surprise. Such words directed at Huaizui would have been extremely harsh no matter who said them. But for them to come from Chu Wanning, his own disciple at the time, was shockingly improper.

Huaizui's expression was placid, but a hint of melancholy colored his features. "This humble monk's control over his emotions was yet lacking back then, and, in a fit of anger, this humble monk said to his

disciple, ‘You can’t even save yourself; how can you save others?’”

“And what did Shizun say?” Shi Mei asked.

“If you don’t know how to save others, how can you save yourself?”

The entire hall fell silent at these words—because they came not from Huaizui, but, in a whisper, from Mo Ran. Upon suddenly hearing him speak the same words as Chu Wanning back then, Master Huaizui gazed quietly at the young man before him, his eyes glinting in the candlelight. After a long interval, he heaved a deep sigh.

“Is that what he’s been teaching you? He…” Huaizui sighed again. “He really…never changed at all. Ever that unwavering conviction in his path.”

Huaizui’s mind was a mess; Mo Ran’s wasn’t much better.

He had always scoffed at that line of Chu Wanning’s. He had thought it to be fake righteousness and empty words. But when he said it just now, he instead felt anguish, like his heart was engulfed by flames.

Several seconds passed before Huaizui’s hollow voice echoed once again inside Loyalty Hall. “It shames me to admit it, but I lost my temper that day. I told him that if he insisted on being stubborn, if he took one step outside the temple gates, then we would be master and disciple no more. Our ties would be severed.” He paused, as if choking on that piece of the past, as if he wanted to explain in detail, yet also did not.

He hesitated, then shook his head. “As I’m sure you’ve guessed, Chu Wanning ultimately chose to cut ties and leave. It’s been many years since that day. He and I sought different things, so though we both walked this mortal world, our paths have never since crossed.”

“That’s not Shi—” Shi Mei began. “That’s not the great master’s

fault."

"Right and wrong," Huaizui replied, "truth and falsehood—these things are not so easily grasped. But Chu Wanning was once my disciple, and since I heard that he died in that bloody battle, this humble monk has found no peace. Thus I have come here to do what I can, try our luck, see if we can bring back Chu-zongshi—"

At that moment, the hall's vermilion-painted doors were flung open.

Xue Meng stood in the doorway. When he'd arrived, no one knew, but he had clearly overheard the part that mattered. He had only been told that Master Huaizui was here, not what the old monk came for, so he'd taken his time getting here, sipping dejectedly at his bowl of herbal medicine as he walked.

Now, after hearing Huaizui's proposal, the bowl lay shattered in pieces on the floor, and the hot medicinal brew had splattered all over him. But the son of the phoenix seemed not to feel the burn at all as he cried, "Bring back? *Bring back?* Shizun can—can come back?!" He stumbled into the room at a run and unceremoniously grabbed onto Huaizui. "You bald donkey,[12] what did you just say? Is this some kind of joke?"

"Young master, this is…" Shi Mei hurried to interject.

"No…that was unbecoming of me." Although he didn't know the man before him had been Chu Wanning's master, Xue Meng did at least remember that he was here to save his shizun's life. He swiftly let go. "Great Master, as long as you can bring Shizun back, if you ever need anything in the future, I, Xue Meng, will go through hell and high water, risk life and limb for you. Just please…please say it's no jest."

"Xue-shizhu," Huaizui said, "there's no need for all that. This humble monk came calling at this late hour specifically for your shizun."

He turned to gaze out the window at the night sky. “It’s almost time. Since the three young shizhu are all assembled, please allow this humble monk to impart to you the details and challenges of the Rebirth technique.”

“Please do, Great Master,” Shi Mei said.

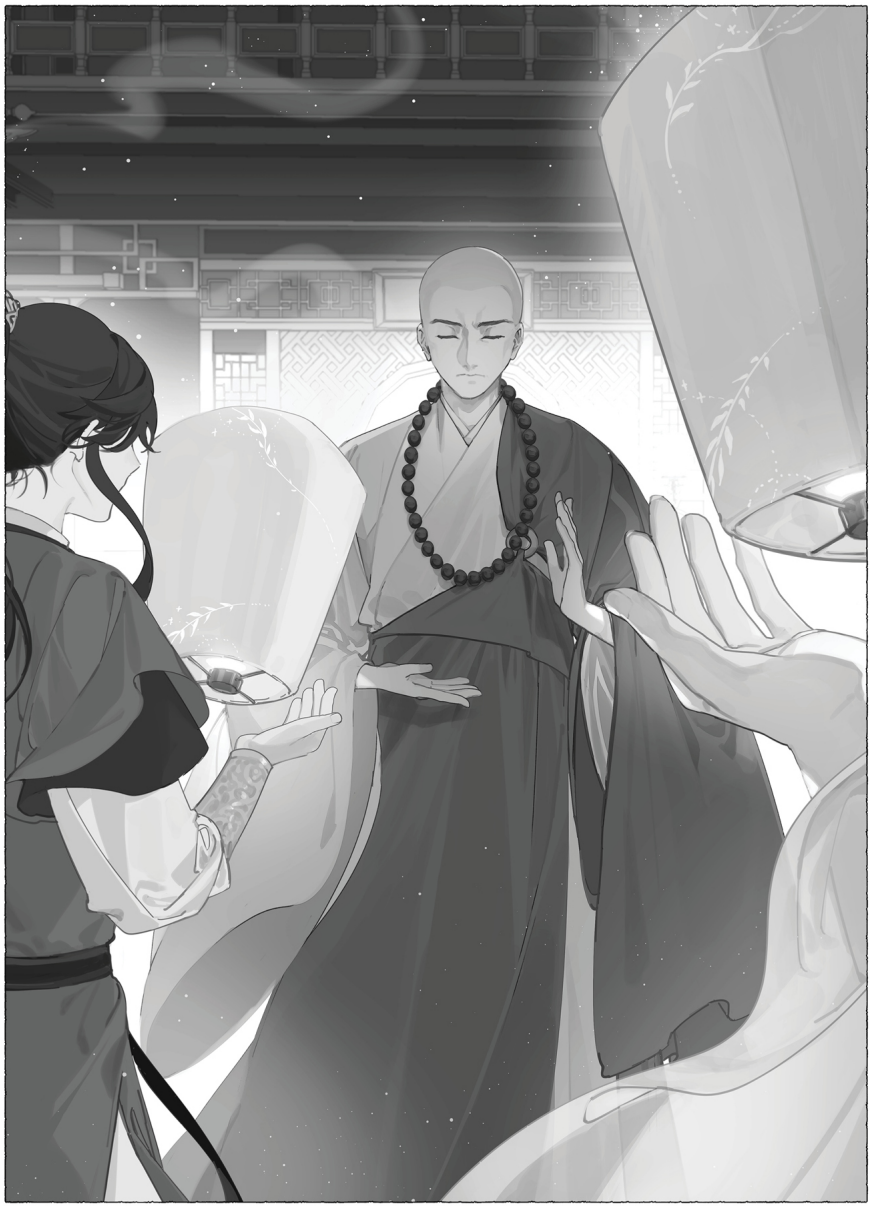
But Xue Meng pressed, urgent, “What’s there to say?! Skip the talk and go save him already!”

“Xue-shizhu is understandably anxious,” Huaizui replied, “but you must realize that any mistake could not only cost you your life, it could also irretrievably scatter Chu Wanning’s soul. If such a thing were to happen, your shizun would no longer be able to enter the cycle of reincarnation. Would you risk this?”

“I…” Xue Meng’s face flushed, and his hands clenched tightly around the hems of his sleeves. Only after several seconds did his grip loosen. “All right, I’ll listen to the great master’s explanation…”

Huaizui produced from his storage pouch three pure-white silk lanterns. The white silk of their exterior was shot through with thin threads of gold, and a complex glyph was embroidered on the center of each lantern in thirteen colors of silken thread, circling and interlacing like a spiderweb spun to capture departing souls.

“These are soul-calling lanterns.” Master Huaizui distributed the three lanterns, one to each of them. “Take these and attend carefully to what this humble monk will say next.”



Mo Ran took a lantern gingerly in his hands.

“Every living person has three ethereal souls and seven corporeal spirits.[13] The three ethereal souls are the earth soul, the cognizance soul, and the human soul. After death, these three souls leave the body, and each go their own way. All of this you know already, but I would hazard a guess that you don’t know where exactly each soul goes.”

“Please enlighten us, Great Master,” Shi Mei said.

“The earth soul and the human soul proceed to the underworld, while the cognizance soul remains within the body. It’s said that one’s soul returns on the seventh day, but in truth, it is only the human soul that returns to the world of the living, where it meets with the cognizance soul.

“The human soul by and large returns due to some unfulfilled wish. Once its wish is realized, it will merge with the cognizance soul within the body. The merged soul will then go to the underworld to reunite with the earth soul, and when the three are complete again, they will there await reincarnation. Many who attempt Rebirth without full knowledge of its intricacies end up calling back an incomplete portion of the soul, which naturally dissipates in short order.”

After Shi Mei’s death in the past life, Mo Ran had indeed tried to call back his soul. But it had been just as Huaizui said: under the bone-white moonlight, there had appeared only a faint shadow of that person, which had dispersed instantly into glitters of light. “So that’s how it is…” Mo Ran muttered.

“Chu Wanning’s cognizance soul yet remains in his body,” Huaizui continued. “That one you needn’t worry about. Our success hinges on finding his human soul and his earth soul.”

“How do we find them?” Xue Meng asked hastily.

“By using the soul-calling lantern,” Huaizui answered. “This

lantern is lit by spiritual energy alone, so you must sustain it with a stream of your own and carry it through Sisheng Peak. If Chu Wanning does not refuse the three shizhu, then the light of the soul-calling lantern will illuminate his human soul."

At these words, Mo Ran's heart sank. "Then what if Shizun doesn't want to see us?"

"That's the first challenge," said Huaizui, "and the reason our chance of success is greater if more people are willing to look for him. I must caution you that if Chu Wanning has no lingering attachment to this world and has already decided to pass on, then the soul-calling lantern will be unable to illuminate him. As you can see, for the Rebirth technique to work, everything—time, place, and people—must align perfectly. If the deceased retains no attachment to any of those who search for him and is unwilling to return to the world of the living, then no one can compel him to return."

Mo Ran's hands tightened unconsciously around the body of the lantern, and he fell silent.

Xue Meng, however, did not hesitate. "Shizun cared for us more than anyone. How could he refuse to come back? Great Master, after we find Shizun's human soul with the lanterns, what then?"

"Once you find the human soul, you must travel to a certain place."

"Where?" Xue Meng asked.

"The underworld."

All three of them were shocked—they hadn't anticipated actually descending to the underworld in person.

Shi Mei let out a soft "ah," then lowered his graceful lashes slightly and asked in a quiet voice, "Um…how could a living person go into hell?"

“I have my ways. Shizhu need not concern himself with the how.” Huaizui leveled him with a measured gaze and continued, “But of the three of you, no matter who finds Chu Wanning’s human soul first, you must wholeheartedly wish for him to return to the living world and be unreservedly willing to go to the heavens above and the underworld below for his sake. If you lack strength of conviction, then Chu Wanning’s soul will scatter midway, and may never be gathered again.”

“That’s…” Shi Mei started.

But Xue Meng spoke first: “The depth of the affection and regard I hold for Shizun is beyond measure. Even if I must go to the Infinite Hells to find him, I’d have no complaints.”

“Shizun died because of me.” Mo Ran lifted his eyes. After a short pause, he too, agreed. “I owe him far too much; I also have no complaints.”

“Good,” said Huaizui. “Then listen well: once one of you finds Chu Wanning’s human soul, the others will no longer be able to see him. Whoever finds him must be sure to keep the soul-calling lantern lit all the way until daybreak, and to keep his soul within its light.”

“Doesn’t sound too difficult,” Xue Meng observed.

“It’s difficult,” Huaizui said. “Once the three souls split, it is common for each to be missing something. It could be hearing, cognition, or memories… Simply put, if you’re unlucky, the shizun you meet may not be willing to listen to you, and you’ll have to figure out some way to win him over.”

Xue Meng was struck speechless.

Mo Ran felt his heart contract with unease. He asked, hesitant, “‘Win him over’? But what if…what if we say something wrong? He was hard enough to predict in life, and now that he’s a ghost…”

Mo Ran’s worry was genuine. But the friction between him and

Xue Meng had festered for so long that Xue Meng's first thought was that he meant to disparage Chu Wanning. He turned furiously to glare at Mo Ran. "What's so hard about convincing Shizun?" he snapped. "Just keep him within the lantern's range."

"What happens after daybreak?" Shi Mei cut in.

"After daybreak, Chu Wanning's human soul will drift into the soul-calling lantern. This humble monk will wait by the bridge with a bamboo raft. Sisheng Peak is situated at the entrance to the ghost realm, and the waters beneath Naihe Bridge flow directly into the Yellow Springs.[14] This raft will ferry whoever locates the soul fragment into the ghost realm."

"You can go to the ghost realm on a bamboo raft?" Xue Meng asked.

"Only one person can go?" Shi Mei questioned right behind him. "The others can't help?"

"They cannot. Whoever finds Chu Wanning's human soul must go alone into the ghost realm to seek his earth soul as well. If that person should give up halfway or have second thoughts, then Chu Wanning's human soul will be devoured by the soul-calling lantern, never to reincarnate."

Xue Meng started. He whipped his head around to Mo Ran and said, "You sit this one out! I don't trust you!"

Mo Ran kept his silence and weathered his cousin's doubts without protest.

Shi Mei did his best to keep the peace. "Young master," he said, "A-Ran isn't the type to back out like that, so…"

"So what if he's not?!" Xue Meng snapped. "He got Shizun killed once already. Why should I believe he won't do it a second time? He's a goddamn scourge!"

“The great master is still here,” Shi Mei reminded him quietly. “How can you say that?”

“Why shouldn’t I say it? Am I wrong? How many times has Shizun gotten hurt because of him! Any time he’s around, there’s trouble.” The rims of Xue Meng’s eyes grew red, and his lips quivered as he spoke. He trembled all over, then suddenly lost control and reached out to wrest the soul-calling lantern from Mo Ran’s hands. “Give me the lantern! Don’t bring Shizun any more misfortune.”

Mo Ran had no reply.

“Give it to me!” Xue Meng swore at him. Mo Ran did not argue. For the first time in his life, he felt Xue Meng was right.

Be it in front of the ghost mistress of ceremonies or at the bottom of Jincheng Lake, which of Chu Wanning’s injuries couldn’t be laid at his feet? How many scars did Chu Wanning carry because of him?

A scourge. *Heh*… He wasn’t wrong.

But even so—even knowing he had treated his shizun disgracefully, even knowing he wasn’t worthy to beg him to return from the underworld, he still didn’t want to let that soul-calling lantern go. He held tightly, stubbornly, to that pale white lantern as Xue Meng cursed and tore at him. Even as bloody scratches appeared on the backs of his hands, he remained still, his head bowed.

When Xue Meng, breathing harshly, finally loosened his grip, it was to say with reddened eyes, “Mo Weiyu, how much longer do you intend to hurt him…”

Mo Ran didn’t look at him. He stared down at that empty lantern in silence. Just as the silence stretched so long it seemed he wasn’t going to respond at all, he suddenly said, quiet, “I want to bring him home.”

His voice was so quiet, pushed down by the weight of shame and guilt. So quiet that Xue Meng at first didn’t quite catch it and stood

blinking for a beat before he realized what Mo Ran had said.
He sneered. “Hah. *You* want to bring him home?”

Mo Ran closed his eyes without a word.

Xue Meng spat at him, every syllable torn to shreds between his teeth, “Have you no shame?”

“Young master—”

“Let go of me. Let go!” Xue Meng ripped his sleeve from Shi Mei’s grasp. Sorrow and resentment flashed in his eyes as he glared unrelentingly at Mo Ran. His voice was raw as he said, “What right do you have.”

Mo Ran’s hands flinched slightly where he held the lantern, and his lashes dropped still lower. For a delirious instant, Mo Ran half-expected to hear Chu Wanning cut in with, “Xue Meng, behave”—as if he were still alive. It turned out that, all this time, Chu Wanning had been protecting him. Mo Ran was the one who had taken it all for granted.

Mo Ran didn’t know what to say. He held desperately onto that lantern as if grasping a lifeline. Head still bowed, he repeated, “I want to bring him home.”

“Is that all you know how to say?! You—”

“That’s enough, Xue-shizhu.” Master Huaizui finally couldn’t bear to watch any longer. He sighed. “Since Mo-shizhu wishes to go, we should let him. If something really does go awry, we can correct course then. But as of now, all is yet uncertain; there is no need for Xue-shizhu to be so antagonistic.”

Xue Meng’s expression was dark; he had more he wanted to say, but restrained himself out of consideration for Huaizui. Yet it wasn’t long before his restraint slipped again and he growled out, “If anything happens to Shizun, I’ll personally lay your corpse at his grave.”

Huaizui sighed again. “Please settle your grievances some other day. There isn’t much time left. Right now, our priority is to find the human soul.”

“Please begin, Great Master,” said Mo Ran.

“The soul-calling lanterns have already been enchanted.” Seeing Mo Ran immediately move to light the lantern with spiritual energy, Huaizui raised a hand to stop him. “Shizhu, a moment.”

“Is there still something else?” Xue Meng pressed impatiently.

“This humble monk wants to be perfectly clear: if one of you should find Chu Wanning’s human soul, you cannot back out of the journey to the underworld. This humble monk will cast a protection spell on you, but it is still horribly dangerous for a living person to enter the land of the dead. One careless move, and you may not return alive.”

Master Huaizui directed a solemn gaze at each of them in turn. “This is no idle threat. Locating Chu Wanning’s earth soul in the underworld may not be difficult—the difficulty is in stepping into hell alone to face the unknown. If you’re lucky, you’ll find the earth soul quickly, but if you’re unlucky and encounter any mishaps, then…”

“We’ll die?” Shi Mei asked.

“Death would be the least of it, I’m afraid. If such a thing were to happen, both Chu Wanning and the shizhu would be annihilated from the cycle of reincarnation.” Huaizui continued, “That’s why, if there’s any kernel of doubt in your heart, I recommend you return your lantern. No one in this world is obligated to die for the sake of another; there’s no shame in valuing your own life. If you are unsure, there’s still time to turn back.”

“I’m sure!” Xue Meng exclaimed, the most zealous and hot-blooded of the trio. “Whoever backs out is a spineless chicken,” he added, and glared viciously at Mo Ran.

But Xue Meng didn't really understand Mo Ran, after all. This cousin of his was nothing like him. Perhaps it was due to the endless humiliations he had suffered as a child that Mo Ran's love and hate had been ground down into sharp claws. If someone hurt him, he would eviscerate them. But if someone treated him well, afforded him even a tiny speck of kindness, he would never forget.

Mo Ran shot Xue Meng a sidelong glance before returning his gaze to Huaizui. "I'm also sure."

Huaizui nodded. "Very well. When you reach the ghost realm, you must find his earth soul as swiftly as possible. Once the human soul and the earth soul fuse inside the soul-calling lantern, it will light your path back to the living world. At that point, this old monk will take care of the rest."

When he put it like that, it didn't sound terribly daunting. But all three were aware that every step of the process was uncertain and full of dangers. Especially journeying into the underworld—if Chu Wanning's earth soul couldn't be found, or if it was missing cognition or memories and would not fuse, then whoever went down to find him could plausibly get stuck down there.

Thus, before the three disciples lit their soul-calling lanterns, Huaizui intoned in a slow, solemn voice, "Once the lanterns are lit, there is no turning back. This is truly no joking matter, so allow this humble monk to ask one final time: Are you absolutely certain? Once you begin, there can be no room for regrets."

The three answered as one: "No regrets."

"Good. Good…" A smile—half bitter, half gratified—spread slowly across Huaizui's face. "Chu Wanning, it seems you've been a better shizun than I."

He recited the incantation silently, and the soul-calling lanterns

flickered faintly twice, then lit. A pair of scarlet flames flared near simultaneously within the lanterns in Xue Meng and Mo Ran's hands, dyeing the white silk a vibrant red. A moment later, the lantern Shi Mei held also flared to life with a faint blue light, the color of water elemental spiritual energy.

"Go." Huaizui said. "Success or failure, return or no—all will be decided this eve. If we fail tonight, then…" Huaizui sighed.

Mo Ran thought of the care Chu Wanning had shown him when he was alive and felt a dull, throbbing pain in his heart. He couldn't bear to hear the rest Huaizui's words, so he said, "The great master need say no more. Whether I have to kneel, crawl, or lay down my own life, I'll definitely bring Shizun back to the world of the living."

As long as he's willing. As long as he's still willing to come back with me.

Three halos of light set out individually from Loyalty Hall. Before long, each had vanished into the boundless dark.

Chapter 104:
Shizun's Wontons

A SINGLE LANTERN WOUND its way through Sisheng Peak, seeking that fragment of returned soul.

Once the soul-calling lantern was lit, Mo Ran became invisible to the living. It was as if he was half a ghost himself. He climbed the bluestone steps and traversed the porticos and balconies, searching.

Red Lotus Pavilion, Frostsky Hall, Three Lives Platform…
He looked everywhere, but Chu Wanning was nowhere to be found. Mo Ran couldn't help but worry that his shizun had grown weary of life and had no wish to see him in death. The thought made his blood run cold. He walked faster, the hem of his robes sweeping past the wild grass underfoot.

Suddenly, he noticed a person standing at the end of Naihe Bridge, cool and aloof, woeful and forlorn. The palms of his hands broke out in sweat, and his heart beat like a drum in his ears as he ran toward that figure.

"Shizun—"

But the face that turned toward him belonged to a soul he didn't recognize, probably a disciple who had perished at the Heavenly Rift. What of his face Mo Ran could see was covered in blood, and he stared at Mo Ran with eyes that were dull and confused.

"S-sorry, I thought you were someone else," Mo Ran stammered, and hurried on. The soul had lost its cognition, and only watched, stiff and motionless, as Mo Ran passed in front of him. His corpse-pale body stood frozen in place, like a shell discarded and left behind in the mortal

world.

Mo Ran felt his chest grow tighter. What if his shizun's human soul was also like that, a walking corpse? Even if he found him, would he be able to watch over him until daybreak?

His heart beat a frenzied stampede as his feet moved faster and faster. Without knowing how he arrived, he looked up to find himself outside Mengpo Hall. Chu Wanning didn't particularly care what he ate, so Mo Ran doubted his returned soul would come here of all places. He was about to turn and leave when, from within the hall, he heard a soft sigh.

The voice was so, so quiet. But in Mo Ran's head, it was like an explosion of thunder. He stumbled through the doors, and his hand shook uncontrollably as he lifted the soul-calling lantern. The light of that lantern was like a new-risen sun, warm yet mild, as it cast its glow on a white-robed figure. Mo Ran's knuckles turned white and his nails dug into his palm. "Shizun…" he murmured.

That fragment of Chu Wanning's soul stood alone, a solitary figure in the emptiness of the large kitchen. His silhouette was faintly washed out, like ink blanched by the passage of time, but it was unquestionably him. He was in the same white robes of frozen mist silk that he'd worn when he died, their hems stained red with blood. Against this conspicuous and vivid hue, his skin looked all the more pale, almost translucent, like smoke and mist—as if he might scatter before a gust of wind.

Lantern in hand, Mo Ran gazed at the mirage before him—like the image of flowers in a mirror, like the reflection of the moon in water.

He wanted to walk faster, afraid Chu Wanning might slip away if he hesitated. He wanted to walk slower, afraid the dream might shatter if he hurried. A thousand thoughts tied themselves into knots in his

mind. Regret and guilt flooded his chest, and the rims of his eyes grew faintly red. He felt that he owed this man far too much. Mo Ran slowed to a stop a short distance from him, too ashamed to show his face.

The lantern swayed gently. Now that Mo Ran was closer, he could see that Chu Wanning was bustling about. He looked slightly anxious, a little clumsy. What was he doing? Mo Ran moved to stand behind him, thinking to help the pitiful soul. But what he saw struck him like lightning. As the shock began to fade, a burst of agonizing pain opened its bloody maw and tore viciously into his neck.

Mo Ran staggered back two steps, slowly shaking his head yet unable to speak. In that moment, had his chest been torn open and his heart ripped out—veins, flesh, and all—it wouldn't have hurt so much as this.

He saw Chu Wanning's hands—raw and bloody from crawling up more than three thousand steps carrying Mo Ran while he still lived—feel their way carefully along the table. On that table lay flour, seasonings, and ground meat filling. Nearby was a pot of water over a strong flame. It was already boiling, but Chu Wanning, that dummy, didn't even know he ought to lower the flames a little. The thick cloud of steam made everything hazy…

Or perhaps it wasn't the steam that blurred Mo Ran's vision, but the tears pooling in his eyes.

Chu Wanning's human soul was painstakingly folding wontons. His hands had ever been nimble and dexterous. Countless armaments had been crafted by those slender fingers; immense barriers had been conjured between those palms. But now those hands, torn and marred, trembled as they carefully folded one full, plump wonton after another.

Mo Ran raised an arm and scrubbed silently at his reddened eyes, unable to speak so much as a single word. Chu Wanning stood with his

back to him. He seemed to finally remember that the water had been boiling for quite a while, and, worried it would all boil away entirely if left unattended, began searching for the pot, feeling around with his hands.

Yes, he felt around with his hands.

Mo Ran surfaced from the anguish he was drowning in and hurried to his shizun's side. Now he understood. When the three souls split, each lost something—memories, cognition, parts of the body. What this soul had lost was a piece of its perception.

This fragment of Chu Wanning's soul, returned from the underworld, could hardly see. His hearing seemed faulty as well—when he knocked something off the table, he couldn't quite tell where it landed. Even so, he toiled to make a bowl of ordinary, unremarkable wontons. As if this had been his favorite pastime in life, as if he found comfort in this haze of steam.

Mo Ran felt his heart might burst from the pain. The world spun dizzily around him. For a moment he couldn't even think, but stood frozen in place as the scene unfolded before his eyes.

There was a crash—this soul, with its diminished vision, could barely see the table in front of him, and had accidentally knocked over Mengpo Hall's salt jar as he searched. It seemed to startle him. Chu Wanning silently withdrew his hand, and an uneasy expression appeared on his bloodstained face.

"What do you need?" A hoarse voice, tight with choked-back sobs and shattered with guilt, spoke up next to him. "Let me help, okay?"

Chu Wanning looked surprised. But perhaps his incomplete soul couldn't sustain such turbulent emotions—after a beat, he sank back into placid calm.

But every word Mo Ran pushed past his lips was difficult and

pleading. “Shizun, let me help you, okay?”

Water roiled in the pot. In this kitchen, the dead person was warm and lively, yet the living one was distraught and listless. After a long interval, Mo Ran heard Chu Wanning’s familiar voice, low and even like the shattering of jade and the crumbling of mountains.

“You’re here?”

A pause. “Yes.”

“Good. Just wait over there for a minute. When the wontons are done, take a bowl to Mo Ran.”

Mo Ran froze. Chu Wanning’s words made no sense at all. He watched Chu Wanning feel around blindly, then watched as he dropped the plump, snowy wontons one by one into the pot. In the haziness of the steam, his face lost its usual sternness; instead, it looked very gentle. “I punished him too harshly yesterday,” he said. “He probably hates me now. Xue Meng says he’s not eating. When you take these to him, don’t tell him I made them. He won’t eat them if he knows.”

Mo Ran’s mind was a mess. It was as if some secret that had slumbered half a lifetime had begun to stir, just about to break through the surface. “Shizun…”

Chu Wanning smiled wryly. “I’m afraid I was too strict with him, but that rashness of his really ought to be tempered… Well, never mind. Fetch me a bowl for me, a thick one if you can. It’s cold outside, we’ll want to keep the food warm.”

Just about to break through—just about to break…

Mo Ran seemed to hear the distant sound of something shattering. A memory finally clawed through its shell, screeching like a ghost as it burst forth and hurtled toward him. Everything went dark.

Wontons. Shi Mei. Shizun…

This was the first time he'd had Shi Mei's wontons. That day, he had mistakenly plucked Madam Wang's precious flower and been punished by Chu Wanning. Tianwen had whipped him bloody and reduced his heart to ash.

Mo Ran had lain in bed, brooding and refusing to rise. He had plucked the flower because he wanted to give it to his shizun, but had instead been rewarded with a round of merciless lashing. He thought he must have been blind to take a liking to Chu Wanning, that his heart must have been covered in lard to think that Chu Wanning was gentle, or that Chu Wanning cared about him.

That day, Shi Mei had come to his room holding a bowl of steamy wontons in chili oil. That soft voice, that gentle tone, and that warm bowl of wontons had turned all Mo Ran's disappointment in his shizun into fondness for Shi Mei.

But how could he have known… How could he have known?!

That fragment of returned soul stood there beside him. Every human soul was different when it returned. Some were like Luo Xianxian, coming back to see what transpired after their death. Others were like the person at Naihe Bridge, senselessly wandering their former home, free of lingering cares or worries.

Chu Wanning's human soul had lost its sight, couldn't tell one voice from another, didn't even know what day it was. He'd likely returned to the world of the living because he believed he'd done something wrong, had made a mistake, and felt bad about it. Wanted to make up for it.

And so, in the end, Chu Wanning made a decision different from the one he'd made in life. He scooped the wontons out of the boiling water and nestled them in the bowl. The slivered scallions were a jade green, the broth was milky white, and the chili oil spooned over

everything was red and spicy. He made to hand the bowl to “Shi Mei,” but at the last second, he paused.

“I really was too unkind to him,” he murmured.

A few moments passed in silence.

“Never mind. You don’t have to deliver it. I’ll go see him myself and apologize.”

Mo Ran stared blankly, his face ghostly pale. He had always believed his shizun too cold—cold like iron, so cold it froze his heart to ice. How could he have guessed that Chu Wanning was actually so kind to him… That Chu Wanning’s lingering regret in the living world was *him*.

That his last wish was to apologize.

The ice melted. Turned into water. Became an ocean. Slowly, Mo Ran lifted his hands and buried his face in his palms. His shoulders shook lightly. A heart like iron? *A heart like iron?!* It wasn’t like that at all…

Mo Ran’s throat felt tight, and a sob escaped as he collapsed to the floor, kneeling before that soul that couldn’t see him. The soul-calling lantern sat on the ground by his feet as he let out a broken wail, screaming himself hoarse as if he might cry blood. Finally, unable to contain it any longer, he bawled, loud and miserable. He knelt before Chu Wanning.

It wasn’t like that at all…

He groveled in the dust, clutching at the hems of Chu Wanning’s bloodstained robes.

It wasn't that your heart was cold and hard as iron. It wasn't that I was unyielding and immovable as stone. It was just that I misjudged you, I misunderstood you completely… It was just that…

"Shizun, Shizun…" He wept, curled up on the floor. "I'm sorry. I was wrong, please…please come back with me…

"Shizun… please come back with me. I was wrong, it was my fault. I don't blame you. I don't hate you. It was all my fault, always making you angry. Next time, if you hit me or scold me, I swear I won't fight back. Shizun, if you just come back, I'll listen to everything you say… I'll respect you, I'll cherish you, I'll treat you right…"

But Chu Wanning's robes were gossamer-thin, as if they might fall to pieces in his hands. Mo Ran wished he could carve open his own chest and give Chu Wanning his heart, just to hear his heartbeat again. He wished he could drain his own blood to fill Chu Wanning's veins, just to see color in his face again.

He would do anything to make up for his mistakes.

"Shizun." His voice broke. "Let's start over from the beginning, okay?"

Before the Heaven-Piercing Tower, under the haitang tree. That zongshi, gentle as a white cat, lifted his head, and his phoenix eyes widened slightly. The cicadas on the branches chirped two, three times, and the youth before him grinned brightly.

"Xianjun, Xianjun, I've been watching you for so long already. Why won't you pay attention to me?" In the blink of an eye, it had been twenty years, two lifetimes. It was all in the past already. He knew it was greedy and shameless, but he said it anyway.

Shizun, let's start over from the beginning. Okay? Please, pay attention to me, won't you…

Chapter 105:
Shizun's Human Soul

THE LAMP CAST its bright light over two people.

They were no longer at Mengpo Hall, but in Mo Ran's room. Chu Wanning hadn't been able to see the road clearly, so Mo Ran had led him by the hand. Chu Wanning was short two souls, unable to tell what day it was or even whose hand he held. He allowed himself to be pulled along in a daze. Mo Ran led him into the room, wiped the tears from his own cheeks, and closed the door behind them.

Chu Wanning set down the bowl of wontons he had carried the whole way. Then, feeling around, he approached the bed and asked softly, "Is Mo Ran still asleep?"

Mo Ran watched him, unable to reply.

When no response came, Chu Wanning assumed Mo Ran was indeed sleeping. He sighed. He seemed a little disappointed.

Mo Ran couldn't bear to watch, and on top of that, he was afraid Chu Wanning might leave. So he sat on the bed and said, "Shizun, I'm awake."

Hearing Mo Ran call, Chu Wanning's brows twitched slightly, and he hummed in acknowledgment. But then he seemed to hesitate and fell silent.

Mo Ran knew Chu Wanning had a thin face. If he thought Shi Mei was here, Mo Ran was sure he'd try to escape after a handful of words. Mo Ran picked up a hair clasp from the table and tossed it toward the door, so that it sounded like Shi Mei had left and closed the door behind him. Then he asked, "What is Shizun doing here? Who brought you?"

Sure enough, Chu Wanning with only half his soul was much easier to fool. He wavered. “Shi Mingjing brought me. Did he leave?”

“He left.”

“Mn…”

Another moment passed in silence. Finally, Chu Wanning spoke. “The wound on your back…”

“The wound on my back is not Shizun’s fault,” Mo Ran said softly. “I picked a precious herb without permission. I deserved Shizun’s punishment.”

Chu Wanning hadn’t expected him to say any such thing, and was rather taken aback. His delicate curtain of lashes quivered as he sighed. “Does it still hurt?”

“Not anymore.”

Chu Wanning raised his hand, those ice-cold fingertips seeking until they found Mo Ran’s face. Another pause. “Sorry. Please don’t hate Shizun.”

The Chu Wanning of the past never would have spoken such tender words. But in death, as he’d thought back on it all while his soul drifted in the underworld, he found that his only regret was the unkindness he’d shown his disciple. And so, given this second chance, those words that were once impossible to say tumbled out so easily.

Mo Ran felt like his heart was bathed in warm spring water. The hatred that had lingered after his rebirth, the old scars that had refused to fade year over year, his stubborn resistance, already on its last breath —all of it had crumbled to pieces, pieces now washed away by these heartfelt words of apology, leaving nothing behind.

In the glow of the soul-calling lantern, Mo Ran gazed at his shizun’s face. It was as if the bloodstains were gone, and a wisp of life

seemed to come again into those pale cheeks. It was as if he were peering across the vast expanse of irreversible time to glimpse Chu Wanning's gentle countenance as it had been when Mo Ran had first seen him. Without thinking, Mo Ran lifted a hand to cover Chu Wanning's ice-cold fingers with his own warm ones. "I don't hate you," he said. "You're good to me, Shizun. I don't hate you."

Chu Wanning stared blankly for a moment, then suddenly smiled.

Though he was dead, though his face was smeared with dirt and blood, his smile was like the first melt of a stream frozen over, filling the room with the warmth of spring. His eyes were closed, but something seemed to glisten between his lashes. It was the brilliant smile of one whose final wish had been granted, proud yet reserved, radiant yet humble. It was like the blooming of the most luxuriant and steadfast haitang tree, countless blossoms like gentle, faint blushes carefully dotting its dignified branches, beautiful and sweet-scented, scattered across the leaves like a skyful of stars.

Mo Ran couldn't help but lose himself in the sight.

Never in two lifetimes had he seen Chu Wanning with such an easy and happy expression. Mo Ran wasn't smart. He thought of the saying "a flower-like smile," but deemed it unfitting; then he thought of "a smile of a hundred charms," but that seemed still more absurd.

Though he racked his brain, he couldn't find the words to adequately describe the lovely vision before him. All he could do was sigh with feeling: *How beautiful.*

This person was so beautiful. How had he never noticed?

Mo Ran was struck by sudden, fortuitous inspiration. "Shizun," he said, his voice hushed, "there's something I want to tell you."

"Hm?"

"I really didn't know how valuable Madam Wang's haitang flower

was. When I picked it that day, it was because I wanted to give it to you."

Chu Wanning seemed surprised. Mo Ran's voice grew yet softer, a little bashful, even a little helpless as he repeated, "It was for…for you."

"But why would you pick that flower for me?"

Mo Ran's face flushed despite himself. "I-I-I don't know. I just, just thought it was really pretty. I…" He trailed off, vaguely surprised that he somehow remembered quite clearly how he'd felt when he picked that flower for Chu Wanning so long ago.

Chu Wanning lacking two souls was unbearably gentle, like a cat without its claws—all soft, docile belly and snowy, rounded paws. He patted Mo Ran's head and smiled. "Dummy."

"Mn." Mo Ran's eyes stung as he gazed up at him. He sniffled. "I'm a dummy."

"Don't do it again."

"I won't do it again." Mo Ran thought about how, after he'd lost hope in the past life, he had perpetrated all manner of evil and terrorized others. He had so angered Chu Wanning that his shizun finally gave up on him and tossed him that verdict that he had resented for a lifetime: *vile by nature, beyond remedy.* A hundred emotions welled up in his chest. "Shizun, I promise, from now on, I won't do anything to disappoint you. I'll be good, I won't be bad."

He was hardly well-read and didn't have any powerful oaths to swear or resounding vows to take. But he could feel the hot blood boiling in his chest as that pure and simple soul that he once had as a child seemed to stir from its slumber. "Shizun, this disciple is slow-witted, and only now realized how good you've been to me." His eyes were bright as he rose from the bed and knelt before Chu Wanning,

bowing low. When he lifted his head, his face was solemn and serious. “So from now on, I, Mo Ran, will never bring disgrace upon you again.”

Sat side by side, the master and disciple had a long talk—though Mo Ran did most of the talking. He was actually quite adorable when he set his mind to cherishing someone. Chu Wanning listened quietly, shaking his head now and again with a smile. Before they knew it, the sky outside the window had lightened, like water diffusing the rich darkness of Huizhou ink.

The long night was coming to a close.

Master Huaizui stood by the stone bridge, the hems of his monk’s robes wet from the spray of the water as it rushed past. Yet he seemed not to notice at all as he waited in silence.

The sun rose steadily in the east. The light of dawn filtered through the leaves of trees to strike the turbulent waters of the Yellow Springs, instantly gilding those racing currents with dazzling gold. The fine spray shimmered like the delicate scales of a dragon, and the light coruscated across the water’s surface as it billowed into waves, glistening and resplendent.

Huaizui was presently in the void dimension and would be visible only to he who found Chu Wanning’s soul. Shi Mei and Xue Meng had both passed this way, but neither could see the old monk by the bank. From a distance, Huaizui appeared tranquil—but unconsciously, he thumbed the string of prayer beads in his hand faster and more urgently with each passing moment.

Without warning, the coils of prayer beads broke and scattered, the Bodhi beads dropping like rain all over the ground. Huaizui’s eyes flew open and he pressed his lips into a thin line. The color drained from his face. It was an ill omen. He stroked the frayed edge of the broken string and watched as the rolling waves tossed stray beads back

onto the shore, and the beads on the shore rolled into the waters. He stared blankly for a spell, his face growing gradually paler.

"Great Master!" someone suddenly called out to him exuberantly. "Great Master!"

Huaizui whipped around to see Mo Ran sprinting toward him from afar. The soul-calling lantern in his hands glowed with both scarlet and golden light. As dazzling as those first rays of dawn had been, this young man's eyes were brighter still, gleaming like a pair of crystals. He screeched to a halt in front of Huaizui, his cheeks flushed, panting slightly, uncontrollably excited.

"I found him," Mo Ran brushed his disheveled bangs aside with one hand, keeping that lantern bearing Chu Wanning's human soul tucked snugly against his chest. "He wasn't unwilling to see me. He's… he's in here." He pointed to the lantern in his arms, but then hesitated. He wanted to hand it over to Huaizui, but was also loath to part with it, and his hands extended only a couple of inches before drawing back again.

Huaizui released a subtle sigh of relief and looked Mo Ran up and down. "There's no need to give it to me," he said with a laugh. "Since you're the one who found him, you can keep him."

So, very carefully, Mo Ran continued to hold the lantern.

Huaizui took up the monk staff he'd leaned against the tree and tapped it lightly against the water's surface. A jade-green bamboo raft seemed to appear from thin air, a white cord tied to its curved bow. "There's no time to lose. Please board."

It was common knowledge that the river that cut through Sisheng Peak flowed to the ghost realm. But since there was a barrier between, traveling to the underworld wasn't a simple matter of floating

downstream. Master Huaizui's bamboo raft carried an enchantment that allowed it to pass between the yin and the yang, and thus, after sitting alone on the raft for half a day and sailing many miles, Mo Ran came to a waterfall.

The waterfall to the underworld.

This waterfall bridged the infinite cosmos above and the deepest reaches of hell below, with no defined boundaries and neither beginning nor end. The water thundered down in a great cascade, and the spray of droplets sent up a foggy mist.

Mo Ran hardly had time to take in this sight. In moments, the bamboo raft had carried him straight toward that curtain of rushing water, as massive as a prehistoric beast. Before he could react, the powerful streams were upon him like countless blades poised to tear through flesh and bone.

"Shizun—!"

Amidst this danger, Mo Ran's only thought was for the soul-calling lantern cradled in his arms. He held it tightly against his body to shield it, never once loosening his grip even as he was drawn into the raging whirlpool. All was dark, stormy chaos…

Mo Ran didn't know how much time had passed when the deafening sound of the waterfall vanished along with that knife-like deluge. He opened his eyes slowly, and only let out a breath of relief after confirming that the soul-calling lantern was safe and sound. When he finally looked up, he was stunned speechless by the sight before him.

The waterfall traversing the realms of yin and yang was nowhere to be seen. The bamboo raft now drifted gently on the surface of a vast and tranquil lake. Its deep blue waters flowed with specks of starlight, and wisps of half-seen souls swam in its currents like shoals of fish.

Reeds flourished along its shores, blooming with lambent flowers that drifted to and fro in the breeze.

From the depths of the reeds on either bank came the voices of a man and woman lifted in song. The notes floated out as if from a dream, sorrowful yet serene. “My body into the thunderous abyss, limbs ground to paste. My skull into the open world, eye sockets sunk to dust. Scarlet ants devour my heart and vultures tear my guts… Only the soul returns… Only the soul returns…”

Green waters of the Yellow Springs flow east, the past is gone, never to return.

Mo Ran drifted on the bamboo raft for some time, until a great gateway reared up in the heavy darkness of night, towering into the black sky.

Once the raft drew closer, he could see that the enormous structure was majestic in scale and covered in fine, exquisite details. It stood in the dark, as it had for time immemorial, like a massive beast of gold and jade adorned with amber pearls. This splendid, treacherous beast crouched with its bloody, putrid maw open wide, ready to welcome untold numbers of lonely souls and lost ghosts into its gullet.

Closer. The sinister turrets were like fangs that could pierce the sun, and the whole structure was like the imposing head of a behemoth lying in wait to swallow the grievances of the world.

Even closer. The piece of Chu Wanning’s soul in the lantern seemed to grow nervous, its golden glow pulsing and swaying.

“It’s all right,” Mo Ran sensed the soul’s unease and hugged the lantern tight. He leaned in, his lips nearly brushing the silk, and whispered soothing words as he channeled more spiritual energy into the lantern to keep Chu Wanning company. “Don’t be afraid, Shizun. I’m here.”

The light quivered for a moment, then settled back into a steady glow.

Lowering his thick lashes, Mo Ran peeked into the lantern and couldn't help but chuckle. He reached out and caressed its edge, then hugged it tighter.

In the darksome night, the words Ghost Gate were writ large and bold, as striking and vivid as if newly inscribed each day in the fresh blood of the living. The bamboo raft reached the shore, and Mo Ran set foot on the road to the underworld. The very ground was saturated with the smell of blood.

As he walked, more and more people appeared around him. Men and women, old and young, even wailing infants who had died almost as soon as they'd been born—all of them drifted toward the inner reaches of the underworld. It mattered not whether, in life, they had been emperors, generals, or ministers with riches and splendors untold, or commoners and peasants without a penny to their name, nor with how much money or what goods they had been buried. In this time, in this place, all were compelled to travel the final road alone.

Mo Ran followed the swarming crowd of souls to the entrance of the ghost realm.

At the gate sat a man fanning himself with a palm-leaf fan—a soldier, judging by his clothes. He had died with his stomach sliced open, and his intestines spilled out from time to time. The gatekeeper used the fan's handle to shove his organs back in with an air of impatience, then glanced up lazily to interrogate the newly deceased soul before him.

"Name?"

"Sun Erwu."

"How'd you die?"

“I—I died of old age.”

The gatekeeper picked up a large stamp and carelessly stamped an underworld entry pass with the words *Died of Old Age*. He handed it to Sun Erwu. “Don’t lose it, or you’ll have to go to Seventeenth Hall to apply for a replacement. You can go. Next!”

Sun Erwu was extremely nervous; in fairness, any newly dead person, regardless of how valiant or knowledgeable they’d been in life, would probably be the same. “A-am I gonna be put on trial? I’m a darn good person, I ain’t never killed ’smuch as a chicken in me life. Just wonderin’ if I can maybe get a better lot in the next one, or at least have enough money to get me a wifey…” The old man prattled anxiously on and on.

The gatekeeper quickly tired of his babbling. “Trial?” He waved a dismissive hand. “That’s still a ways off. There are so many souls here in the ghost realm; it’ll take at least eight years to get through the reincarnation queue, if not ten. Just hang around and wait your turn. It’s not much different from the living world. Save all that about chickens and wifeys for the lord judge when the time comes. Next!”

Sun Erwu was dumbfounded. “Eight or t-ten *years*?!” he stammered in his thick accent.

A few heads back in line, Mo Ran was equally shocked. “Wha—? It takes that long to get judged for reincarnation?”

“’Course. Though it’s a different story if you’re truly reprehensible or have something weird going on with your soul.” The gatekeeper snickered maliciously at his own comment. The movement made his intestines slip out again, and he had to pause to stuff them back in. “The ones destined for the eighteen hells never have to wait long.”

Mo Ran gaped at him.

The dense half-wit Sun Erwu had more questions, but the

gatekeeper's patience was at an end. He shooed him off, saying, "Go on, go on, away with you. You're not the only one waiting to get reincarnated, y'know. Don't hold up the line. Next! *Next!*"

Thus Sun Erwu was driven off with a wave of the guard's palm-leaf fan.

The next person in line was a young woman with her pretty face skillfully made up. When she parted her lips to speak, the line of her gaze bespoke the poise and coquetry unique to a certain profession. "My lord," she said in a soft voice, "this humble one is called Jin Hua'er. I was beaten to death by a brutish villain…"

The ghosts took their turn at the front of the line, and each had their own thoughts and manners of death. There were few sights more bustling and jumbled than this—every chaotic facet of life seemed to be represented here. Amidst this crowd, Mo Ran held the lantern in his arms as close as he could. He owed his shizun; he didn't care about anything else. All he cared about was finding the last piece of Chu Wanning's soul.

"Name?" The gatekeeper yawned. He lifted his eyes to peer at Mo Ran.

Mo Ran was just about to answer when the man quivered, as if he sensed that there was something off about this young man. He abruptly stood to stare intently into Mo Ran's face.

Mo Ran mentally cursed—he had already died once; what if there was something odd about his soul? Not to mention he was currently holding a piece of someone else's soul, which was pretty questionable in itself. But there was only one entrance to the ghost realm, so he had no choice. Mo Ran braced himself and met the gatekeeper's gaze squarely.

The man narrowed his eyes.

Mo Ran feigned a calmness he didn't feel as he gave his name. "Mo

Ran.”

The gatekeeper waited.

Mo Ran’s heart thundered like a drum as he willed his expression to remain steady. “I had a qi deviation and died on the spot. I’d like an entry pass, please.”

Chapter 106:
Shizun, Where Are You?

"DIED FROM A QI DEVIATION?" The gatekeeper repeated his words back slowly, then hmphed. "You a cultivator?"

"Mn."

"A cultivator and you're down here at your age? How very unfortunate." The gatekeeper smirked unkindly. Many ordinary people didn't have the good karma to be born with the foundational aptitude for cultivation, so mocking cultivators amounted to a case of sour grapes.

"Y'know, your soul looks kinda iffy to me. Like it's tainted."

Master Huaizui had placed an enchantment on Mo Ran meant to cover up his living scent and allow him to interact with souls. Thus, while there was certainly something peculiar about this young man, the gatekeeper couldn't immediately put his finger on it. He sat back down and crossed one leg over the other, then rummaged around in a drawer. He extracted a pitch-black ruler.

"Sin-measuring ruler," he said smugly, though it wasn't clear what he was so smug about—the ruler wasn't even his. But with some people, the less important their position, the more it pleased them to put on airs. The gatekeeper slapped the ruler down on the table and raised his eyes to stare at Mo Ran. "Stick your hand out. This lordly one's gonna measure your merit in life."

Mo Ran stared, speechless. His merit in life? If they measured *that*, wouldn't he get chucked directly over to Lord Yanluo to be ground into dust? But with so many eyes watching and nowhere to run, he had little

choice. He exhaled, then shifted the soul-calling lantern into one hand and extended the other.

The gatekeeper made to place the ruler against the inside of Mo Ran's wrist. But the very instant it made contact with his skin, the ruler screeched shrilly. Globules of blood dripped from its pitch-black body, and the weeping and wailing of thousands filled the air.

"I will not rest in death…"

"May you never be allowed to reincarnate! Mo Weiyu!"

"Dad! Mom! You son of a bitch! Why?! *Why?!*"

"Don't kill me…please don't kill me—!"

Mo Ran jerked his hand back, his face devoid of color.

The assembled ghosts were all staring at him, and the gatekeeper's stare was the most inscrutable of all. He eyed Mo Ran with a gaze like a fierce beast, then bent his head to look down at the ruler. The red glow had faded, and the dripping blood was also gone, as though it had been a hallucination. The surface of the table now perfectly clean. But on the ruler, a line of characters slowly appeared: *Sins beyond redemption, send to level…*

Which level of hell?

Mo Ran had pulled his hand back before the sin-measuring ruler could finish its work, so the rest was left off.

The gatekeeper yanked Mo Ran's arm back, and his eyes locked onto him like a restless predator who'd finally caught a whiff of rare prey. His nostrils flared, and a strange light flickered in his eyes. Half his intestines had slid out again, but this time, he didn't bother shoving them back in.

"Hold still while I retake the measurement." His face was impatient and greedy, as if he was already picturing himself claiming

commendations from Yanluo. His ghostly claws dug into Mo Ran's wrist as he hauled him over, and his expression was practically unhinged as he slapped the sin-measuring ruler against Mo Ran's wrist once again. Catching a ghost meant for the eighteen hells would be a great feather in his cap. He'd be promoted by at least three tiers then and there, and could say goodbye to the tedium of sitting at this gate recording the comings and goings of this morass of souls. "A proper measuring this time!"

The sin-measuring ruler lit up again. Just as before, blood streamed from its black surface and screams filled the air. It was as if every person Mo Ran had ever killed and all the sins that he had ever committed were crammed into this small black rectangle. The sheer magnitude of resentment overwhelmed the little thing almost to bursting.

"I hate…"

"Mo Weiyu, I'll never let you off, even when I'm dead…"

Mo Ran was becoming more and more distraught. He lowered his lashes and pressed his lips tightly together, something unreadable in his eyes.

"You have no conscience! You've turned this world into hell!"

"I'll haunt you when I'm dead!"

"*Aaaaaah*—!"

Weeping, wailing, cursing, hating. Then suddenly, amidst those clamoring voices, a soft sigh. "I'm sorry, Mo Ran. It was this master's fault…"

Mo Ran's eyes flew open, full of grief and sorrow. Once again, he heard those words from his past life, the ones Chu Wanning spoke on the verge of death. They were so gentle, so sorrowful, but they cut into his skull like a knife, as if they would cleave his soul apart.

The voices slowly faded to nothing, and the sin-measuring ruler fell silent. A line of characters appeared again: *Sins beyond redemption, send to level…*

Mo Ran didn't pull away this time—but the writing still didn't finish.

The gatekeeper blinked, then tapped the black ruler a couple of times. "Is it broken?" The ruler quivered a little from the taps. Then, unexpectedly, the words disappeared. A thin layer of celestial haze rose from the ruler's surface, and it glowed with a brilliant radiance.

This time, there was no weeping or wailing. Instead came music like melodious birdsong drifting between clouds, as if the most elegant chords of the ninth heaven had descended into the underworld. The crowd of souls was entranced, and even the gatekeeper found himself mesmerized.

Only when the celestial music ceased did the gatekeeper finally come to his senses. When he checked the sin-measuring ruler again, it bore these words: *Everything normal, allow to pass.*

"Impossible!" the gatekeeper cried. What had happened to "sins beyond redemption" a moment ago? Why was it "everything normal" now? In disbelief, he gave it several more tries, but it was the same every time: first sounds of screaming, then beautiful music, and finally, without exception, *Everything normal, allow to pass.*

The gatekeeper was bitterly disappointed, but he had no grounds to block a normal soul from entering the underworld. He shoved his intestines spitefully back into his abdomen and clicked his tongue in displeasure. "*Tch.* That's *some* qi deviation you had, all right."

Mo Ran was just as surprised; he hadn't the least idea what was happening either. After a bit of thought, he concluded that Master Huaizui's enchantment must have confused the ruler. He sighed in relief.

“Take your damn entry pass and get lost, you’re wasting my time. Beat it!”

Mo Ran was more than happy to oblige and had turned to leave with the soul-calling lantern in his arms when the gatekeeper’s eyes suddenly lit again and he yelled, “Hang on!”

Mo Ran kept his expression neutral, but his heart began to race. Feigning exasperation, he asked, “What is it *now*?”

The gatekeeper jerked his chin toward the lantern, “What’s that you’ve got there?”

“Oh, this…” Mo Ran’s hand stroked the lantern as the gears in his head whirled rapidly. He turned around with a smile. “It’s my burial item."[15]

“Burial item?”

“Yeah, it’s a magical relic.”

“Heh. Well, isn’t that interesting.” The gatekeeper pointed to the table, his eyes flashing. “Put it down there and let’s measure one more time. Your magical relic was probably interfering with the ruler.”

Mo Ran roundly cursed this asshole in his head but held his tongue. He could do nothing but set the lantern down and stick his wrist out once again with some apprehension.

The gatekeeper seemed quite confident this time. He eagerly swung the ruler into place once more. But the result was the same. The words appeared, clear as day: *Everything normal, allow to pass.*

Mo Ran was just as confused as the gatekeeper. But with that, the man finally gave up for good and waved him lazily in. Mo Ran didn’t dare linger a moment longer. He picked up the soul-calling lantern and, hugging it to chest, strode down the lengthy passageway. As he stepped out, the quality of the light suddenly changed.

The ghost realm unfolded before his eyes.

The first level of hell stretched into the distance with no end in sight. The sky was the scarlet of a sunset on fire, and all manner of strange flora sprouted from the ground. Rows of uneven roof tiles sprawled across the immediate skyline, and palatial structures lined the horizon. On a monolith at the entrance were engraved the words: *Thy flesh returns to dust, thy soul to Nanke Town*. The red-painted gateway that towered next to it bore the words NANKE TOWN carved and gilded upon it, each character the height of a grown man.

It seemed this was the name of the first level of hell. All of the deceased—assuming there was nothing extraordinary about them—would cool their heels here for eight to ten years until summoned to the second level by the Judge of the Underworld, at which point they would stand trial and receive judgment.

Mo Ran peered about as he walked, cradling the soul-calling lantern in his arms. As far as he could tell, the layout wasn't much different from a regular town in the living world. There were roads, residences, and even shops. He counted eighteen streets in total, nine running from north to south and nine from east to west. The souls of men, women, and children went about their business, some laughing, others weeping. It was truly a gathering of ghosts.

Mo Ran heard a newly deceased woman sobbing from the east side: "What do I do, what do I do? Everyone says remarried women are cut in half and divided between their two husbands. Is it true? Can anyone tell me if it's true?"

Beside her, a girl with disheveled clothes and tangled hair wiped the tears from her face. "I didn't want to do that kind of work, but how else could I make a living? When I was still alive, I tried to atone for my sins. I went to a local temple to donate a threshold to be stepped on as

people came and went. But the village chief demanded four hundred gold to swap out the threshold… If I had that kind of money, I wouldn't have sold my body in the first place…"

Over on the west side, a man was counting. "Four-hundred-and-one days, four-hundred-and-two days, four-hundred-and-three days… We agreed to die together for love, but I've been down here four-hundred-and-four days already and she still hasn't followed." He sighed. "She's so delicate. Maybe she got lost on the way down? If she really did, what will I do?"

These freshly dead souls milled about at Nanke Town's gate, crying and muttering, lingering and protesting. Farther in were the older ghosts. They had already been back to the living world and resigned themselves to their circumstances. These ghosts were more equanimous, and each had taken up some livelihood to occupy their time while they awaited trial.

By the third street, things were as busy and bustling as any market in the living world. These were all souls not yet severed from their mortal lives, after all. They had not yet drunk Mengpo's soup of forgetfulness and, though ghosts, were still nigh indistinguishable from ordinary humans. Those who had been entertainers in life busked at the sides of the streets; those who had been seamstresses still wove clothing, only now they used the clouds of hell; butchers dared not kill any more, but could at least sharpen knives and scissors. Sounds of peddling and cheering rose and fell, lively and energetic.

Mo Ran stopped in front of a ghost selling calligraphy and paintings. The ghost was stick-thin and sickly, with jutting cheekbones and a hollowed-out stomach. He probably hadn't managed to sell a single painting in his entire life and literally starved to death.

When he saw that someone had sat down at his booth, the skinny

scholar looked up. His eyes were bleary, but his expression did not lack for passion as he said, “Gongzi, looking to buy a painting?”

“I want you to draw me a portrait.”

The scholar was woeful. “Paintings of *people* can hardly compare to the artistry of landscapes. Take a look at this painting of Mount Taishan draped in misty clouds…”

“I don’t care for landscape paintings,” Mo Ran said. “I just need you to draw someone for me.”

“Don’t care for landscapes, huh?” The scholar shot him one glance, then another, displeased. “It’s said that the kind know to appreciate the mountains, and the wise know to cherish the waters. Gongzi is still so young; you really ought to absorb some culture, smell some ink. As it happens, I would rather not part with my Mount Taishan painting, but since you had the good taste to stop at my booth, surely you have some good sense to go with it. How about this—just for you, I’ll drop the price to—”

“I want you to draw a person.”

The scholar fell silent.

They two stared each other down. The scholar, of course, was no match for Mo Ran, and folded in no time. This made the man so mad his dead face seemed to flush. “I don’t draw people. If you really want it, it’ll be ten times my normal rate.”

“Things cost money even in the ghost realm?” Mo Ran wondered aloud.

“Paper money burned by friends and family, yes,” the scholar replied coldly. “Money makes the world go round. Though I myself disdain riches, a gentleman earns his money through honest work. We are neither friends nor family, nor do we have a sympathy like the legendary Bo Ya and Ziqi,[16] So what reason would I have to do you any

favors?”

He nattered on and on in this vein. Mo Ran’s book knowledge was limited, and he was completely out of his depth. He could only frown and say, “I just got here, no one’s burned any money for me yet.”

“No money, no deal.”

Mo Ran thought it over and hit upon an idea. He pointed at the Mount Taishan painting. “All right, no deal. But I’m bored and have nothing to do, so could you tell me something about landscape paintings?”

The scholar paused. At once, all his anger turned into delight. “You’re interested in landscapes?”

Mo Ran nodded. “Does it cost anything to learn from you?”

“Nope,” the scholar was quite conceited, and the way his face lit up was faintly ridiculous, yet also pitiful. “Knowledge is free; money would only foul it. Scholarly matters mustn’t be tainted by such material concerns.”

Mo Ran nodded again and thought to himself, *Ah, so that’s how the little bookworm starved to death*. Hard as it was not to laugh, the man *was* rather pathetic. Unfortunately, Mo Ran truly was penniless right now, or he really would’ve given him some silver.

The scholar took the painting from its frame with great excitement, struck a pompous pose, unnecessarily cleared his incorporeal throat, and then, in a tone both anxious and snobbish, said, “Let us begin.”

Watching the little bookworm take the bait, Mo Ran smiled broadly. “Please do enlighten me.”

Chapter 107:
Shizun's Portrait

ONCE THE SCHOLAR hit his stride, he prattled ceaselessly for four incoherent hours, all Confucius this and Mencius that and quite over Mo Ran's head. It made Mo Ran's head spin and his eyelids grow heavy, but he still had to feign interest—no easy feat, to be sure.

However, when it came to faking attentiveness in lessons, Mo Ran was highly skilled. First, he'd start with an "Oh?" paired with a furrowed brow, as if confused or unconvinced. He'd let them talk a while, then try an "*Oh*…" and relax his brows to create the impression of dawning comprehension. Some minutes later, he wouldn't forget to open his eyes wide and make them sparkle, then go "Ohhh!" to show he'd gained new insight and understanding thanks to his teacher's brilliant guidance.

Mo Ran had applied these three "ohs" liberally throughout Chu Wanning's lessons. Unfortunately, Chu Wanning never fell for it; he merely looked at Mo Ran with cold eyes and told him to shut it.

The little bookworm, on the other hand, had certainly never met such an "attentive" listener in all his life, and by the end, his eyes were practically glowing. So delighted was he that his previous reservations and haughtiness evaporated, and he now only wished dearly that he'd met Mo Ran sooner.

"I understand now," Mo Ran said with a smile. "Now that I've heard what you have to say, I can see that this painting is truly a priceless masterpiece."

Had the little bookworm been alive, he would undoubtedly have

blushed bright red. But even without the telltale flush, his excitement was obvious; he was so elated that he hardly knew what to do with his hands or where to put his legs. The scholar beamed like a little kid, his gaunt face alight.

Mo Ran had never seen such a happy ghost.

That should do the trick. Mo Ran rose and bowed respectfully. “It’s getting late,” he said, “I’m going to go look around a bit more and find someplace to stay. If the professor isn’t too busy, I’ll come again tomorrow.”

The scholar’s smile grew even brighter at being called “professor” out of the blue. He was half ecstatic and half panicked as he hurried to demur: “No, no, no, I’m no professor. I sat the exam several times, but in the end, I didn’t even pass the county-level test to qualify as a xiucai,[17] I…” He trailed off with a sigh.

Mo Ran smiled. “The depth of one’s knowledge is measured not by titles and ranks, but by the content of one’s heart.”

The scholar was shocked. “To…to think you were actually capable of such eloquence.”

“It’s something my shizun said once. I’m just lending his words.”

The scholar paused for a long beat. “*Borrowing* his words.”

“Oh, is that how it goes? Ha ha ha ha.” Mo Ran scratched his head. “I remembered wrong again.”

It was growing late, and the scholar was unlikely to get any more customers. He began to pack up his cases and pouches. “I’m pretty free myself,” he said, “and it’s not every day I hit it off so well with someone. Though it’s said that friendship between gentlemen is light as water,[18] it’s also said that when meeting friends over wine, a thousand cups is too few, so I say…”

Mo Ran swiftly cut him off before he could spew any more scholarly ink. “Let me guess,” he said with a smile, “it’s getting late, how about we go for a drink somewhere?”

“Ah, yes, that’s right. Some wine to lift the spirits. How about it?”

“Sounds good,” Mo Ran nodded. “Professor’s treat.”

The scholar was completely speechless.

The greasy little table supported a measly plate of a dozen or so scattered peanuts and two cups of wine scarcely half full. A single dingy candle was the tavern’s only source of light, and behind the counter, the sly-looking proprietor wiped a cracked bowl.

“It’s a bit shabby.” The scholar seemed a little uneasy. “But I never really got any paper money, so I’ve only been to a couple places. This one’s the most passable of the lot…”

“It’s fine,” Mo Ran picked up the wine cup and looked it over thoughtfully. “Do ghosts eat?”

“It’s all fake, works like offerings.” The scholar popped a handful of peanuts in his mouth, but the amount on the plate remained unchanged. “See?” he explained. “Like this. It’s just for the flavor.”

Mo Ran calmly set down his cup of wine. He wasn’t really dead; if he ate, he would get busted.

Three rounds of wine later, the scholar had shaken off his earlier despondency. He chatted with Mo Ran about this and that, then asked, “Mo-gongzi wanted me to draw someone’s portrait earlier. Is it a lover?”

Mo Ran frantically waved a hand. “No, no. It’s my shizun.”

“Ah.” The scholar seemed surprised. “I’ve been doing business down here for many years. I’ve had people come to me looking for paintings of beauties, but this is the first time someone’s asked me to

draw their shizun. Is this shizun of yours good to you?"

Weighed down with guilt, Mo Ran said, "Yes, he's very good to me."

"No wonder, then," the scholar nodded. "What do you want a drawing of him for?"

"To find him."

"Ah." The scholar looked surprised, "He's in the underworld too?"

"Mn," Mo Ran replied. "I heard that the deceased stay here in Nanke Town for eight to ten years. I'm worried about him, so I wanted to see if I could find him and keep him company."

The scholar didn't doubt him in the least; in fact, he was rather moved. He mulled it over, then sighed. "Such devotion is hard to come by… All right, Mo-gongzi! I'll do it for you!" As he spoke, he got up and opened his case to retrieve his drawing tools.

Mo Ran was overjoyed. He thanked him profusely and asked for his name, thinking he'd burn a pile of money for the poor guy once he returned to the world of the living. The pair exchanged effusive words of friendship as Mo Ran helped the man spread out the paper and grind the ink. But as soon as they set to work, everything screeched to a halt.

"My shizun… He uh…" Mo Ran balled his hand into a fist and drummed it against his knee several times, but didn't manage to drum up a single spark of inspiration. He hesitated for a long while, sifting through every word in his pitiful vocabulary. At last, he managed to squeeze out, "He's beautiful. Please draw him."

The scholar stared.

"Well? Draw."

There was a long pause. "Beautiful in what way?"

"Isn't it obvious? Just, you know, beautiful. So draw him

beautiful.”

“Yes, I know, draw him beautiful, but…you know what, never mind. What kind of face does he have?”

“What kind of face?” Mo Ran stared blankly. After some thought, he said, “A face is a face.”

The scholar was beginning to get irked. “Oval, heart, square, round—at least give me a *shape*?”

“I don’t know these things! Anyway, he has a handsome face.”

The scholar was rendered speechless once again.

“Forget it,” Mo Ran said. “If you don’t know, then just draw it like my face. Our faces are shaped pretty similar, anyway.”

The scholar gave up on speaking altogether.

Next were the eyes.

“What kind of eyes?” Just as Mo Ran was about to answer, the scholar added, “Do *not* say eyes are eyes.”

“I know, I know.” Mo Ran waved a hand. “His eyes look… hm, how do I put it? Scary but…charming? And cold but gentle.”

The scholar flung down his brush in a rage. “I quit! Go find someone else!”

“No wait!” Mo Ran grabbed at him hastily. “No one else draws as well as you do!”

The scholar glared at him in barely contained anger. But Mo Ran’s face shone with sincerity, so he relented and said, stiffly, “Very well, but you have to give me proper answers.”

Mo Ran felt a little wronged. He’d thought his answers were perfectly fine. What about them hadn’t been proper? But beggars couldn’t be choosers—he nodded obediently and hugged the soul-calling lantern close.

“So, the eyes,” The scholar got back down to business. “Leopard

eyes? Round eyes? Almond eyes? Phoenix eyes? Or…"

Mo Ran's head was spinning under the barrage of unfamiliar terms. He shook his head. "Slit eyes?[19] No, that's way too small. His eyes are upturned; I don't know what that's called, but they, uh…they swoop upward, really prettily…"

"That's what phoenix eyes are."

Mo Ran opened his mouth, but seeing the scholar's face like a thundercloud ready to burst, promptly shut it again. "All right, slit eyes. Whatever you say."

The scholar continued his questioning. "Nose: high or flat?"

"High."

"Lips: thin or full?"

"Thin."

"Eyebrows: dense or sparse?"

"Dense."

"Thick or thin?"

"Average, I think… Wait, I know this one! He has sword-straight brows."

"Fine." The scholar laid down a few brush strokes. "Any birthmarks on his face?"

Mo Ran tilted his head in thought. Then his face reddened as he mumbled, "Yeah…"

"Where?"

"On his left ear," Mo Ran said haltingly. "A tiny, light-colored mole, and…" *And he's so very sensitive when kissed there.*

The scholar quirked a brow. "And?"

"N…" Mo Ran shook his head like a rattle drum and his face

turned even redder. “Nothing.”

The scholar shot him a curious glance, but luckily, the light in the tavern was dim, and he couldn’t see how red Mo Ran’s face was. He dipped his brush in the ink again and asked, “Usual attire?”

“He likes to wear white, with his hair pulled up with a jade crown, or else in a high ponytail.” Mo Ran considered, then added, “He also wears his hair down sometimes, and when he does, he looks really…”

“Don’t say beautiful again!” The scholar was at the end of his rope.

“Okay. Handsome then.”

The scholar had no words.

With that painful ordeal behind them, the drawing was finally complete. Mo Ran blew the ink dry and lifted the paper to examine the work. It wasn’t as handsome or beautiful as Chu Wanning, and didn’t really look completely like him, but for his purposes, it was passable. He smiled. “Many thanks, Professor. It’s great.”

“I’ve just about drawn Pan An, Fan Li, Xi Zi, and Diao Chan. Any other legendary beauties I should add?”

Mo Ran laughed. “After I find Shizun, I’ll be sure to thank you again properly.”

They drank and chatted until the skies grew dark, and when it came time to part ways in front of the tavern, Mo Ran set off with Chu Wanning’s portrait in hand. According to the scholar, there was a place on the fifth street called Tailwind Hall that made a business of investigating all kinds of things for Nanke Town’s new arrivals.

He headed there without delay.

Outside Tailwind Hall, a banner bearing a black serpent floated lightly in the breeze. When Mo Ran pushed the door open and strode

through, he was greeted by the sight of a long counter that stretched across the main hall. A dozen-odd ghosts in ocher red robes sat behind it, each wearing a wooden mask painted with a snarling face that concealed their real features from view. Before every masked ghost stood a long, meandering line of the deceased bearing assorted expressions and various requests.

Hundreds of white wax candles hovered near the rafters of the building, casting overlapping shadows upon the overlapping dead. The place was packed, and ghosts came and went without pause.

"Sir, can you help me find my younger brother? His name is Zhang Bayi, from Gusu. He was twenty-one years old when he died…"

"You have a portrait?"

"N-no."

"That's fine, but it'll cost ten times as much."

Farther along the counter…

"Look, laddie—"

The masked ghost cleared her throat, her voice clear and crisp.

"Ah, sorry, didn' know you was a miss. Missy, it's like this. So, when I died, that wife o' mine said she definitely won' remarry, but I been seeing her and my li'l bro makin' eyes at one another a while now, an' I just can't accept that. So can you help me check an' see if she's bein' a proper widow up there or if she ran off with my li'l bro?"

"Here's our price list for the investigation of matters in the living world. Please take a look."

And on the other side…

"Excuse me—I liked a girl when I was alive, but she was from a wealthy family. I was just a poor scholar who couldn't even pass the imperial exam, and I didn't have the guts to confess to her, so I didn't

stand a chance. She got married eventually. At first, I was happy for her, but it turned out that the guy was already married…" The ghost sighed. "There was an accident, and she…passed on before me. I want to ask about two things: the first is her current whereabouts, and the second is…if we'll be fated in our next life."

"We can certainly investigate matters of the next life. However, the cost will not be in money, but in years of your lifespan from your next life. As for the lady's whereabouts, please provide her name and portrait."

"Oh, okay, okay. I have her portrait here. Her surname is Yao, given name Lan…"

There were ghosts chattering away like this at every counter. Even when their bodies had long rotted, they couldn't relinquish their worldly attachments.

Mo Ran walked a circuit around the room, clutching his lantern and peering left and right. He noted that in exchange for answers, the people of Tailwind Hall only took two things in payment: money or years of lifespan.

He had no money. But if he let them take from his lifespan, they might discover he was a living person who had infiltrated the underworld. He grew increasingly fretful, and cursed Master Huaizui for not having the foresight to give him some paper money for a such a situation.

He looked again at the price list. The cost of simply inquiring after someone wasn't particularly high. Mo Ran made up his mind and ran back toward the tavern. It took a bit of searching to locate the scholar again, and every ounce of his persuasive power to convince the man to lend Mo Ran a few meager silvers.

Money in hand, Mo Ran returned to Tailwind Hall. He waited in

line for half an age before it was finally his turn.

“I’m looking for someone,” Mo Ran said urgently. “Here’s his portrait.” He handed Chu Wanning’s portrait over and was about to say more—but unexpectedly, the person at the counter took only a single glance at the portrait before chuckling and rolling the scroll back up.

“Why are you looking for him?”

“Ah?” Mo Ran was taken aback. “You can tell where he is just by looking at the painting?”

“Of course. But first, tell me—why are you looking for him?”

“He’s someone I know.”

The masked ghost shot him another look. “Wait here, please,” he said. He leaned over to the colleague next to him, and the two shared a hushed discussion. When he turned back to Mo Ran, his tone had warmed considerably.

“Since you’re Sir Chu’s acquaintance, no payment is necessary.” The ghost rose to his feet and beckoned Mo Ran forward. “Come along, then. Follow me upstairs.”

Chapter 108:
Shizun's Earth Soul

MO RAN FOLLOWED the ghost upstairs without a clue as to what was happening. The worn wooden stairs creaked beneath his feet with every step. He couldn't resist asking, "You call him Sir Chu?"

"That's right. Lord Yanluo himself sent him up to manage this place. He's our superior."

Mo Ran swallowed his surprise and said nothing.

"Here we are." The ghost stopped before a half-moon-shaped doorway on the second floor. The carved vermilion door stood slightly ajar. The ghost knocked lightly. "Sir Chu, there's an acquaintance of yours here looking for you."

There was a beat of silence. Then a voice drifted out, gentle like wine warming on a stove, like silky hair across a pillow.
"An acquaintance? Him again? I've already said I don't wish to see him. Please tell him to leave."

The ghost cleared his throat. "Sir Chu misunderstands. It's not him this time."

"But who else is there?" Another moment of silence. "No matter, come in."

The room was simple and elegant. The furnishings were plain, such that the space seemed a little bare, but the floor was covered by a soft, luxurious rug. Mo Ran's foot sank into the pile as he stepped inside, and he caught a whiff of the sharp scent of furs. Completely at odds with that wild smell was the figure standing before the window, pruning a flower branch.

His long, inky hair draped loose over his white robes and sweeping sleeves, and the vivid red buds on the branch quivered lightly where he held it between his delicate fingers. Perhaps it was the rule here in Tailwind Hall, for he, too, wore a dark blue mask with bared fangs and bulging eyes. Yet, on this man's face, even such a ferocious mask looked somehow gentler. He trimmed the excess branches, then gathered them up and discarded them, before at last turning around.

Mo Ran's throat felt dry. The exchange between the masked ghost and Chu Wanning a second ago had left him with a vague sense of perplexed unease. He didn't know what faculties this soul had lost. If Chu Wanning didn't remember him…

As he stood fretting, the man laid down the pruning shears and stepped toward him. Mo Ran, a man undaunted by heaven and earth, found himself flustered and agitated, sweat covering his back.

"Shizun."

The man paused, coming to a stop before Mo Ran. Mo Ran heard something like a chuckle from behind the mask.

"Shizun?" he asked. "Perhaps the little gongzi has the wrong person?"

Just as he suspected… Just as he feared.

Mo Ran's heart dropped like an enormous rock into an endless abyss, dragging him down with it. He stared at the man before him, at a complete loss for words.

When no response came, the man placed his slender, pale hand over the boldly painted mask and removed it, revealing the elegant and composed face beneath. Mo Ran felt that thousand-pound rock disappear in an instant. He stared at the man's bare face, astonished. Without the slightest hesitation, he blurted, "Chu Xun?"

It was small wonder that the person downstairs had mistaken the

portrait. Chu Xun and Chu Wanning were nearly identical, except that Chu Xun was gentle where Chu Wanning was cold. Only someone extremely familiar with one of them would be able to tell the two apart.

Someone like Mo Ran.

The man before him now was indeed Chu Xun, that gongzi of Lin'an City whom he had seen in the illusion of two hundred years ago. Mo Ran had spoken his name without thinking. But the real Chu Xun had never met Mo Ran. He blinked in surprise, then smiled. "You actually do know me?"

Mo Ran waved his hand frantically. "No, no, I got the wrong person. But I do also know you…" He peered curiously at the man before him as he spoke. Chu Xun had died hundreds of years ago, but he had yet to be reborn. Presumably this was due to the task assigned to him by Yanluo, which allowed him to exist outside of the cycle of reincarnation, at least for now.

Running into Chu Wanning's ancestor here was the last thing Mo Ran had expected. He found the experience quite bizarre.

"I see." Chu Xun nodded, then continued with a smile, "Who is the little gongzi looking for? Since fate brought you up these stairs, I will help you search. Otherwise, who knows how long it may take to find this person? Nanke Town is a vast place, home to millions of ghosts."

Mo Ran had planned to quickly explain the misunderstanding and then run back downstairs to ask for a re-do on the divination. He hadn't expected Chu Xun, as warm-hearted in death as he had been in life, to offer his personal assistance. He joyfully accepted. "Thank you, Sir Chu! I'd appreciate that!" So saying, he handed over the portrait.

Chu Xun unrolled it and took a look, then smiled again, "No wonder the people downstairs were confused; there really is quite a resemblance. What's his name?"

“Chu Wanning,” Mo Ran said. “His name is Chu Wanning.”

“His surname is Chu as well? What a coincidence.”

Mo Ran’s heart leapt. “Could it be that he’s related to you?”

“I’m not sure. Investigating matters in the living world requires a visit to the Ninth Ghost King. And I…have a death grudge against the ninth king and refuse to beg any favors of him. I know nothing of matters in the living world.”

The ghost king in question was, of course, the very same who had broken through the barrier at Lin’an and slaughtered Chu Xun’s entire family back then. Even Chu Xun, composed as he was, couldn’t help the complicated expression that rose on his face at the mention of this old wound.

Mo Ran had thought to use this opportunity to confirm the relationship between Chu Wanning and Chu Xun. But coming up against this, he could only shake his head. “That’s a pity.”

Chu Xun smiled wanly and said no more. He turned to fetch a gold-plated compass engraved with a yin-yang pattern from the shelf, then invited Mo Ran to take a seat.

“This thing can tell us where he is?”

“Eight or nine times out of ten, yes.”

“What about the other one or two?”

“The energy of some people’s souls can be strange,” Chu Xun explained, “so there’s always a possibility the compass can’t locate them. But it’s rare; the little gongzi would have to be quite unlucky.”

The divination was set up, and the little golden needle within the compass spun to point shakily toward the north—but a moment later, it swiveled to point south, then suddenly east, suddenly west, and in the end, settled on spinning round and round.

Chu Xun eyed it, speechless.

"So…" Mo Ran asked cautiously, "what does that mean?"

"Ahem," Chu Xun cleared his throat, looking a little embarrassed. "I'm afraid the little gongzi…is indeed quite unlucky."

Mo Ran eyed it, now also speechless.

Truth be told, Mo Ran had always had rather bad luck. He just knew it wouldn't go so smoothly. He sighed and thanked Chu Xun, preparing to wade back into the sea of people and resume his search for Chu Wanning.

But just then, the compass stopped its mad whirl. Its needle pointed shakily in one direction, as if not too sure, then, a fraction of a second later, nudged itself a hair more to the side.

"Little gongzi," Chu Xun called out, "just a moment!"

Mo Ran stopped in his tracks, holding his breath as he stood by the table and stared at the compass. The needle swiveled left and right, refusing to hold steady, but it more or less pointed out a general direction.

Chu Xun knitted his brows. "What's going on…"

"Is it that weird?"

"Not *weird*, exactly, but it is rather unusual." Chu Xun gazed at the compass, his brows drawing tighter still. "He seems to be in two places at once."

Mo Ran was startled. How could that be?

At present, Chu Wanning's cognizance soul was still within his body, and his human soul was inside the soul-calling lantern. That meant there should only be one—his earth soul—left in the underworld. How could Chu Wanning appear in two places simultaneously?

"In any case," Chu Xun continued, "the compass is picking up one

to the southeast and another to the northeast. I recommend the little gongzi check in both directions. It's possible some magic is affecting the compass and preventing it from pinpointing the right location."

Heart filled with anxiety, Mo Ran thanked Chu Xun again and sped out of Tailwind Hall, heading east. He ran eastward from some time, until he came to a fork in the road. His footfalls screeched to a halt. Southeast or northeast?

Mo Ran lifted the soul-calling lantern anxiously. But after a few moments, as he stared into the lantern that held Chu Wanning's human soul, he felt a vague and peculiar feeling in his heart. It seemed to vacillate, drawing closer and then retreating, sometimes strong, sometimes weak. He followed it down narrow roads and dark alleys, and the farther he walked, the stronger it grew.

He felt as though Chu Wanning's earth soul was calling the lantern in his hand—or rather, calling *him*—toward a certain place.

At last, Mo Ran came to a stop before an old, two-story wooden building. He looked up, his gaze sweeping across the massive plaque above the door.

AILING SOULS SANITARIUM.

Exposure to sun and wind had peeled away the plaque's black paint, and the red on the raised lettering had fared no better, flaking off to reveal the moldering wood beneath.

Mo Ran frowned, and his heart stuttered in his chest—these three words only increased his unease. Ailing souls… What did that mean? Was this why Chu Xun's compass hadn't worked?

He pushed open the door and went in, stepping over the tall threshold. He got his answer soon enough.

Inside were hundreds of beds filled with hundreds of unconscious souls. A dozen-some ghosts wearing white masks were making rounds,

channeling spiritual energy into the beds' occupants. This so-called Ailing Souls Sanitarium was, it seemed, an underworld infirmary.

Mo Ran searched for the ghost doctor overseeing the sanitarium and found him in the inner rooms. He cupped his hands respectfully toward him. "Doctor, I…"

The doctor was tremendously busy and cut him off impatiently. "Prescription pickup is on the second floor, examination queue is to the left."

"Then where do I go if I'm looking for someone?"

"Looking for someone's over…huh? Looking for someone?"

Mo Ran showed the doctor Chu Wanning's portrait. "Have you seen him?"

The ghost doctor reached for the painting and looked it over, then peered back up at Mo Ran. Through the holes in his white mask, his eyes were filled with pity. "A relative?"

"Mhm, that's right."

"His earth soul is damaged." The ghost doctor pointed up the stairs. "He's in the innermost bay up there. I'm afraid this type of illness can't be treated; the most we can do is delay the inevitable. You should go see him."

Mo Ran started. "Damaged? Damaged how?"

"Who can say? The cycle of reincarnation is an agonizing thing. It's possible his soul was damaged during his last few reincarnations. Or, since he was a cultivator this lifetime, perhaps he had a qi deviation that damaged his soul. Whatever the case, it's no longer whole—how am I supposed to know how it happened?"

"Then," Mo Ran asked apprehensively, "then how would having a damaged earth soul affect someone?"

“Affect?” The ghost doctor thought a moment. “It’s not a huge issue, since it’s only one of the three souls that’s incomplete. It won’t affect his ability to reincarnate. If anything…in his next life, he’ll have a shorter lifespan, worse luck, or a weaker constitution.”

Mo Ran listened quietly. He wasn’t exactly happy to hear that, but there was little he could do. He thanked the ghost doctor and headed upstairs.

The second story of the sanitarium was less densely packed than the first, which had been so crowded it was hard to breathe. The souls here were those that were unlikely to ever wake up, so perhaps there wasn’t much need to watch over them: only one doctor stood by in the entrance hall, napping leisurely on a rattan chair. Mo Ran left him where he was and walked straight in.

Though the space was large, there were no more than twenty sickbeds in it. The beds were laid out under the rosewood windows, and white screens between each offered some privacy.

It was silent as the grave.

The floor creaked beneath Mo Ran’s feet, and his eyes landed on the innermost bay. It was next to a half-moon-shaped door that led out to an open balcony. Moonlight poured in through a thin silk curtain that drifted in the breeze.

There were twenty-odd ailing souls in this room, yet for some reason, Mo Ran knew with searing clarity exactly where to go. Perhaps it was the soul-calling lantern showing him the way. Whatever the reason, he walked directly to the innermost bed without so much as a sideways glance, and came to a stop in that pure, hazy moonlight. He lifted the curtain.

The last piece of Chu Wanning’s soul lay within. His eyes were closed, and his face was colorless; he looked no different from the body

resting in Frostsky Hall. Despite having found him, despite the hope of rebirth that was now within reach, Mo Ran's heart ached and his nose stung as he gazed down at that frail, bloodstained figure.

He set the soul-calling lantern down at the head of the bed. Then he sat on the bed and reached out to gently hold the soul's ice-cold hand. But this soul was unlike the human soul he'd met before. Maybe the damage had been too severe—Mo Ran's fingers passed right through him to land on the clean white sheets below. The body was incorporeal. He couldn't touch Chu Wanning's earth soul.

Mo Ran felt unbearably lost and pained.

If one more thing had gone wrong, if Master Huaizui hadn't come, if Chu Wanning's soul had been just a little more damaged, if his shizun had despaired and refused to see him… He bent down, and though he knew he wouldn't be able to press his forehead to Chu Wanning's, he couldn't help it when he closed his eyes and leaned over the bed like he was embracing that faint, fragile earth soul.

"Shizun."

Mo Ran's body overlapped with Chu Wanning's soul, the moonlight spilling over them. Indistinct and indistinguishable.

Mo Ran heaved a long sigh. His heart was heavy and bitter. He had seen Chu Wanning's body, then his human soul, and now this sickly earth soul. Each stirred something different in him. He had knelt before the body, his sins and guilt nearly tearing him apart. He had repented before the human soul, had held Chu Wanning's hand and begged him to return.

But the earth soul.

He tried to hold him, yet he couldn't reach him, couldn't touch him. He was at once gripped by a bottomless dread—this was what he deserved. He was laden with so many sins. His hands were bathed in

blood. What merit, what *right* did he have to accompany this man again, to stand by his side?

Mo Ran's eyes remained closed. The tears clinging to his lashes soaked into the flimsy pillow. He'd once believed the heavens were unkind to him. Now, that seemed like an absurd joke. That wasn't the case at all. It turned out that the heavens had been very kind to him indeed; it was his own heart that was unkind, that rendered everything dark and gloomy.

It was his own fault.

He suddenly realized that he had once walked a path of no return. He wanted to turn back. He wanted to use the rest of his life to make amends, use the rest of his life to set things right. But he didn't know if doing all that would even be enough to bring him back to the start.

Forget Taxian-jun. Forget being Emperor of the Human Realm. He didn't want any of it. All he wanted was to lead a proper life, to be the kind of righteous person that Chu Wanning had always hoped he would be.

It was said that recognizing your mistakes and changing for the better was what counted most. But he had sinned so deeply. How long would it take to atone for his sins? Perhaps he would never escape this endless remorse, even until the day he died. After all, a scar cut through water could return to even smoothness, but a wound carved into a tree would forever remain.

"Shizun." After sitting for a long time, immersed in the light of the moon, immersed in Chu Wanning's nearly transparent soul, Mo Ran spoke as though coaxing a child: "Come on, let's go home."

He straightened and picked up the soul-calling lantern. Mo Ran recited the incantation wordlessly, and the earth soul was drawn inside, its faint silhouette vanishing into the lantern.

Then Mo Ran waited.

He waited and waited, until the earth soul and human soul had fused completely. Then he waited some more. But still, nothing happened.

Mo Ran's face paled. What the heck?!

Chu Wanning's earth soul and human soul had merged! Wasn't he supposed to see the path to bring Chu Wanning back to the living world?

Was Master Huaizui's spell malfunctioning?!

Chapter 109:
Shizun's Second Earth Soul

MO RAN'S HEAD WAS NUMB, his thoughts a burr of white noise. His hands and feet felt like ice as he hugged Chu Wanning's soul to himself and descended the stairs in a fog.

"Doctor…"

"You again? What is it now?"

"You're sure the one upstairs…is my shizun's earth soul, right?"

The ghost doctor was rather annoyed. "Of course it is. How could I get something like that wrong?"

Mo Ran refused to give up. "Could it be his cognizance soul, or…"

"Or what?" The ghost doctor clicked his tongue in irritation. "A person has three souls: earth, cognizance, and human. I've practiced medicine here for a hundred and fifty years. If I couldn't even tell souls apart, Lord Yanluo would've kicked me back into the Wheel of Reincarnation long ago."

Mo Ran pressed his lips into a thin line. But then, a vague idea unfurled in his mind. "Doctor, in your hundred and fifty years, have you ever seen anyone with two earth souls?"

"What's wrong with you?!" the ghost doctor snapped, cross. "Looks to me like your head's not working—maybe I should take your pulse!"

Of course, Mo Ran couldn't actually let the ghost doctor take his pulse. Master Huaizui might have cast an enchantment on him, but if he wasn't careful, the jig would be up. He offered a hasty apology and fled

the Ailing Souls Sanitarium, clutching the lantern bearing Chu Wanning's human and earth souls.

It was always dim in the ghost realm. The only way to tell day from night was to look up at the sky: if a lukewarm sun hovered behind a layer of murky mist and heavy red clouds, it was day; if a cold moon hung high above, it was night. Right now it was night, and the roads were gradually emptying of traffic.

Mo Ran walked through the streets alone with the soul-calling lantern, his eyes trained on the ground. He didn't know what to do, and the farther he walked, the more helpless and alone he felt.

In his childhood, such helplessness and uncertainty had once been his daily companions. He found that facing these feelings again now rattled him. Mo Ran thought of the people he'd known back when he was scraping by at the pleasure house. In the end, the House of Drunken Jade had gone up in flames. They had all died, save for him… He counted the years. Everyone—aside from his mom—had probably yet to be reincarnated. If he kept wandering like this, there was no telling whom he might run into.

Then he thought of Xue Meng. He thought of his angry bellows as he tried to tear the soul-calling lantern from Mo Ran's hands. He'd called him a "goddamn scourge."

What right do you have? Have you no shame?

Hugging the lantern close, Mo Ran footsteps slowed until, finally, he stopped next to a wall. Despite his best efforts, his eyes had grown red. He hung his head and gazed at that gentle, golden flame. "Shizun," he muttered in a small voice, "could it be that you…that you really don't want to come back with me?"

The flame didn't answer. It continued to burn silently.

Mo Ran stood for a long time before he managed to rescue his

calm. The underworld was immense, and he didn't know where he could go, or to whom. All at once, he remembered Chu Xun, and sped back toward Tailwind Hall as though he had grasped a lifeline.

By the time he arrived, Tailwind Hall was preparing to close, and a masked ghost was shutting the doors and locking up for the night. Mo Ran hastily called out to stop him, a note of pleading in his voice, "Sorry, but please wait!"

"You again?" The ghost was the same who had led him upstairs earlier. "What are you doing back here?"

"Sorry to trouble you, but it's urgent…" Mo Ran had run too fast. He panted for breath, his eyes bright and anxious. He swallowed and said, voice hoarse, "I want to see Sir Chu Xun again."

Chu Xun was staring absently at a branch of haitang blossoms arranged in a slender, white porcelain vase. He looked up, startled, at Mo Ran's sudden return. "Why did the little gongzi come back? Were you unable to find him?"

"I found him," Mo Ran replied, "but I…I…"

Chu Xun saw at a glance how tense and anxious this young man was, and correctly guessed that whatever troubled him must be a difficult subject. He invited Mo Ran in and closed the door behind him. "Have a seat."

Mo Ran, worried that Chu Xun might notice something amiss if he continued to hold the soul-calling lantern, stowed it away in his qiankun pouch. Chu Xun was no malicious ghost, but the matter of a living person sneaking into the underworld was best kept secret from all ghosts if possible.

"The little gongzi went southeast?"

"Mn."

Chu Xun thought for a moment. "It was the Ailing Souls Sanitarium, wasn't it."

Mo Ran nodded. He considered his words before continuing. "I saw him at the Ailing Souls Sanitarium, but it was an incomplete earth soul that couldn't move nor speak. He even looked different from the other ghosts—he was half-transparent, and he could be seen but not touched."

"Damaged earth souls are often like that." Chu Xun was somber. "Sometimes a soul like that can scatter if agitated, never to be gathered again."

Mo Ran chewed on his lip, then ventured, "The doctor there said people with incomplete souls will exhibit certain impairments in life. But the person I'm looking for—he was just fine while alive. So I was wondering if there might be some mistake." He paused, lifting his head to look toward Chu Xun. "Sir Chu, is it possible for someone to have two earth souls?"

Chu Xun was taken aback. "Two earth souls?"

"Mn."

Unlike the doctor at the Ailing Souls Sanitarium, who had immediately shot him down, Chu Xun mulled this hypothesis over carefully with downcast eyes. Eventually he said, "I suppose…it isn't impossible."

A tremor ran through Mo Ran's body, and his head snapped up. His eyes were bright in the room's dim candlelight. "Really?!"

Chu Xun inclined his head in affirmation. "Normally, an individual only has three ethereal souls and seven corporeal spirits. But I once knew a woman with two cognizance souls."

“Can you tell me anything more about her?”

Chu Xun shook his head, and his lashes dropped lower and quivered slightly. He took a moment to steady himself before saying, “I would prefer not to. Those events are long past. That woman is suffering in the seventh level of hell now. When Yanluo finds someone with an abnormal soul, he sends them to the seventh level to be slowly peeled apart.”

Hearing this made Mo Ran even more fretful. In the low light, he didn’t see the pain in Chu Xun’s eyes as he pressed on. “Why did that woman have an extra cognizance soul? Normally people only need to gather their three souls after the seventh day. So if someone has an extra earth soul, then would all *four* souls need to be reunited?”

“That is likely the case.”

“Then the woman you mentioned…”

“She was used by the Ninth King in death. She was forced back to the living world…” Chu Xun paused, the slender fingers resting on his knee slowly balling into a fist. “To the living world, where she ate her own child alive.”

Mo Ran fell silent. He abruptly recalled the past events he had witnessed in Lin’an within the illusion at the Peach Blossom Springs. With a start, he realized that this “woman” of whom Chu Xun spoke was in truth his wife, and that these were his most heartrending memories.

Could it be that Chu Xun had put off reincarnation and stayed in Nanke Town because of his wife? Was he waiting for her to be stripped of that extra soul and return to him from the seventh level, so they could reincarnate together? Mo Ran couldn’t bear to pry any more than he already had.

Chu Xun said no more on it either. To mention something like this again, in just this handful of bald words—*ate her own child alive*—even

after two hundred years, even as a ghost, the jut of his throat still trembled.

Chu Xun closed his eyes. “The woman’s soul became scrambled and torn, and fused with the child’s cognizance soul.” There was a long pause. “So her extra soul is actually that child’s cognizance soul. The child’s soul became stuck within hers, and the two assimilated until they were completely inseparable.”

In death, as in life, this person swallowed his own pain in order to help others. Mo Ran felt horrible. But he couldn’t say so outright, so he simply said, “You don’t have to say any more. I-I get it now.”

“I tell you all this so you may understand: if the Chu-gongzi you’re looking for really has two earth souls, then it’s highly likely that one of them was not originally his.”

Mo Ran turned this over in his mind. “Is it not possible that it was one earth soul split into two?”

“It’s possible, but not in your case.”

“Why not?”

“I’ve seen a soul split in two as well,” Chu Xun explained, “but that’s another story. Such a thing generally only occurs when an individual has sinned so deeply and killed so wantonly that their souls cannot bear it and shatter. Even then, the one that shatters is always the human soul, the one responsible for morality and humanity. Never the earth soul or the cognizance soul.”

There was a long silence. “I see,” Mo Ran muttered. The moment he heard the words *sinned so deeply and killed so wantonly*, he had already concluded that this scenario couldn’t possibly apply to Chu Wanning. But as for himself, he did wonder—when, in this life, he truly met his end and came to the underworld, would his human soul shatter in two? Would he get his just deserts?

“Besides,” Chu Xun added, “if it really was one soul split in two, the other half of the earth soul would have been similarly afflicted and been sent to the Ailing Souls Sanitarium as well. Since the little gongzi found only one damaged earth soul, I suspect the other is a complete, healthy soul.”

At this remark, things clicked into place. Mo Ran brightened immediately. “Thank you so much, Sir Chu!” he said in a rush. “Then I…I’ll go search again right away!”

“Very good. In addition to pointing toward the Ailing Souls Sanitarium earlier, the compass also pointed northeast. The little gongzi should try going that way. However, Nanke Town is large, and there are so many ghosts coming and going as they await reincarnation…” Chu Xun sighed.

Mo Ran saw the shadow of pity in those gentle eyes. He already knew what Chu Xun meant to say.

The vastness of Nanke Town. The millions of wandering souls. Even with a direction to search in, finding one particular earth soul was easier said than done. If two people were not fated to meet, it wouldn’t matter if the streets were lit as bright as day. They might still pass like ships in the night, one to the east and one to the west, never once noticing, never once seeing. And with the underworld as dark and silent as it was now, the task was nigh impossible.

But Chu Xun was a gentle soul. He lifted a hand and clapped Mo Ran on the shoulder. “The little gongzi possesses such heartfelt sincerity. I’m sure you will meet again.”

This man looked so like Chu Wanning. As he spoke, a bead of wax dripped down the candle, and the flame flickered, obscuring his features in shadow. In the gloom, Mo Ran seemed to see Chu Wanning’s face in a moment of gentleness, seemed to hear Chu Wanning’s voice say they

would meet again.

Tears sprang to Mo Ran's eyes despite himself. He swiftly bowed his head and clasped his hands in a gesture of respect. His voice was hoarse. "Really, thank you so much."

But Chu Xun made no reply. Even after Mo Ran turned and left, closing the door behind him, he still stood staring after him, a hint of bewilderment in his phoenix eyes. Were those…tears he saw in that young man's eyes?

Ghosts couldn't cry. Had he been mistaken? Or…

He turned to glance over his shoulder at that vase with its quietly blooming branch of haitang blossoms. Flowers from the living world couldn't withstand the yin energy of the underworld—even after his careful tending, a petal had still fluttered down to land on the aged wood of the table.

Chu Xun stepped over and picked up that vibrant petal. Held between his fingertips, it withered and crumbled away in a heartbeat, scattering into dust.

"Guard."

"Sir Chu." No sooner had he spoken than a masked ghost entered and stood respectfully to the side.

Chu Xun didn't turn. He gazed at the haitang blossoms and asked in a soft voice, "Has that man come to Tailwind Hall recently?"

"No, he hasn't. It's been the same as always: a branch of haitang blossoms every ten days. He dares not come to Tailwind Hall himself, and always has another deliver it for him."

Chu Xun remained quiet.

"What is it, sir? Was there something suspicious about that gongzi just now? If that man dares send people to disturb your peace, you can

always ask Lord Yanluo to…"

"No." Chu Xun shook off his daze and interrupted his subordinate, turning to the ghost with a faint smile. He exhaled heavily. "It's nothing. I doubt that man sent him. And even if he did, the child came only to look for someone; it was nothing to do with me."

"But what if he *was* sent by that man? Why go to the trouble—"

"He was no party to that wrong." Chu Xun stood quietly next to the flowering branch, his robes the color of snow. "Let him be."

The streets were desolate. Mo Ran left Tailwind Hall and walked northeast. He took Chu Wanning's portrait door-to-door, but it was like trying to find a needle at the bottom of the sea. Those he showed the portrait to were quick to wave their hands in dismissal. Some didn't look at all before brushing past.

"The guy in the drawing? Never seen him before."

"Haven't seen him, haven't seen him! Don't disrupt my business."

"Out of my way! So damn annoying! Do you have any idea what time it is?! Piss off! What portrait? Get it out of my face!"

The residents of Nanke Town may have been ghosts, but these ghosts had yet to relinquish the emotions and desires of life. Living together as they did, most had gradually settled back into the familiar rhythm of their days in the mortal world. Over these eight to ten long years, they would seek out friends or relatives, or else adopt a dead cat or a dog. In short, they carried on living as they had before death. And so, though they didn't need to sleep, they would still lie in their beds to rest out of habit when the moon climbed high up in the sky.

Thus, as night closed in around him, even fewer people were willing to talk, and no one had any clues to share. Mo Ran walked down

that long, endless street stretching to the northeast. He knocked on every door and visited every house, ducking his head and smiling apologetically…

"I already told you! I saw it wrong! I gave it more thought and the guy I saw wasn't actually the one in the drawing. Leave me alone already!" The bearded man was trying to close the door, ready to retire for the night with his wife and kids of the underworld.

Mo Ran had run into this man on the street as he'd been returning home earlier and had questioned him with the portrait. The man had considered for a while and said he remembered seeing the person in the picture near the east market a few days ago. Then his wife had thrown him a look. As if struck by a sudden realization, he'd clammed up and started waving his hands, insisting he'd made a mistake.

But Mo Ran was sure this man knew something—so he had refused to give up. He'd dogged him the whole walk home, pleading with him every step of the way.

The man shoved him brusquely out the door and pulled at the wooden door bolt. Mo Ran begged, frantic, "Please think about it again! Where in the east market? And where did he go after? Please…"

"I said I don't know!"

The commotion drew the attention of nearby ghosts, and a crowd soon gathered to spectate. The man bellowed angrily as he pushed against the door, heedless of Mo Ran's hand still in the doorframe.

The door slammed roughly on his fingers. The pain was excruciating, but he didn't care about that right now. Mo Ran swallowed the pain and refused to pull his hand from the narrow gap, using all his strength to push it wider instead. "I'm begging you, please think about it again. I just want to know where he went after that…"

The man wrenched the door open and, taking no notice of the

blood welling up on Mo Ran's fingers, shoved him roughly back.
"I already said I don't know!" he yelled. "Now fuck off!"

Chapter 110:
Shizun Doesn't Know about the Little Puppy's Past

MO RAN WANDERED the streets alone. There were still a few ghosts drifting eerily about, and the bluestone steps were covered in lonesome clumps of moss, wet and slippery beneath his feet.

Only after he'd calmed down from that fierce struggle did he finally notice his fingers had been scraped raw and bloody. The crudely made doorframe had been covered in splinters, which had embedded themselves into his hand and made an awful mess. Fortunately, it was so dark now that the ghosts around him didn't notice.

He stared quietly at his injured hand for a time, his lashes lowered. Compared to the pain in his heart, the gruesome wounds on his hand didn't hurt much at all.

Mo Ran looked back at the door, shut firmly against him. He well knew that the man behind it wouldn't speak another word to him. He was no stranger to such rejection. Mo Ran was intimately acquainted with malevolence, to the point that he could tell merely from the look in someone's eye or a handful of words whether or not his plea would have any effect. Truth be told, the moment that man had changed his tune, Mo Ran knew he wouldn't get another honest word out of him. It was just that he didn't want to give up where Chu Wanning's earth soul was concerned. So he had persisted until he was shoved outside and the door slammed in his face.

It had been many years since he'd last been so brutally refused. But sometimes, the passage of time didn't really heal anything. Nor could coming into happier circumstances change what was innate—

some things were simply carved into the bones.

Xue Meng had once called Mo Ran lowlife scum. It was funny—these venomous words from the darling of the heavens hadn't made so much as a dent in his dignity. Because he was right. Mo Ran *was* what everyone called lowlife scum. He'd been called fouler things more times than he could count. He was used to it.

He glanced over his shoulder one last time at the tightly bolted wooden door. Then he slowly trudged away amidst low snickers from the crowd of watching ghosts. A lone figure among those voices of ridicule and derision.

This scene of abject helplessness, playing out once again after so many years, overlapped in his mind with the distant, faded memories of childhood. Mo Ran put one foot in front of the other. The circumstances were so very alike—he couldn't help but recall those years when it had been just him and his mom…

In those days, they hadn't yet settled at the pleasure house, but wandered the streets of Linyi near Rufeng Sect.

In those days, at least he still had his mother.

His mom loved him. He was still small, and she hadn't wanted him to go begging for food on his own, so she always left him in an abandoned firewood shed while she ventured out to sing and perform on the street.

Mo Ran's mother was dexterous and could dance nimbly on a bamboo pole, so she usually managed to earn a palmful of coins each day—enough for a piece of flatbread and a bowl of congee shared between mother and son. Like any mother, she wanted her child to eat well. But Mo Ran would take only a few bites before refusing any more, complaining that the flatbread was too hard, or the congee too bland, or

that he was full.

Little did she know that, every time she sighed and ate the “leftover” half of the flatbread and half bowl of congee, her little boy was secretly watching. He would curl up and pretend to sleep, peering at her through slitted eyes, and would only relax when he was sure she’d filled her stomach. Then he would feel at ease, despite the rumbling of his own.

Nor did she know that, every day, after she left to busk on the streets at Linyi's east market, her child would crawl from the pile of firewood and sneak out to beg for food two streets away from her.

His mother sang a beautiful song as she balanced on her ten-foot pole and danced upon it with her frail body. The ground below her was strewn with jagged rocks and ceramic shards; were she to fall, all these sharp pieces would pierce her skin. But the spectators thought the danger novel and exciting, so she staked her lowborn life and danced, all to win a smile from the moneyed onlookers.

Two streets away, her child begged door-to-door on the street, a grin on his grubby little cheeks as he repeated the same greetings for good fortune over and over, hoping for a bite to eat. But he didn't get so much as a mouthful, at least not often.

One day, the young madam of a wealthy family, pregnant, bored, and in a foul mood, was strolling the streets when she spied Mo Ran's mother dancing on her pole.

She stepped to the side and watched for some minutes, intrigued. Then she sent an attendant to go speak to the dancer. "These broken rocks and ceramic bits you have are just for show, aren't they? Where's the sincerity? Our madam says if you replace them with knives, blade-up, and dance over that, she will reward you with ten taels of gold."

Faced with such a cruel request—practically demanding her life—the mother's only response was, "I can't afford to buy any knives."

The wealthy madam laughed and sent someone running to the ironware store to purchase a hundred sharp knives, and her attendants arranged them upright on the ground.

"Now dance," the richly adorned woman said gleefully, caressing her bulging belly.

A crowd of fiends and demons, eager to watch this sport, soon

clustered round, all of them decked in silks and jades that sparkled in the sunlight. Like vultures that had scented the stench of blood in the air, they gathered to feed on the corpse, necks outstretched and eyes glittering.

"Go on, dance."

"Dance well and I'll pay you."

"There's tips to be had!"

The regions that fell under Rufeng Sect's oversight had no shortage of wealthy people. What they lacked was the excitement and liveliness of such death-defying wagers. Those silks and satins, gold and pearls, closed in on the mother with the bamboo pole. They surrounded that penniless woman in rags.

And so that woman, her life as cheap as wild grass by the roadside, smiled and curtsied toward the crowd of carrion vultures. She thanked them for their patronage, and began a graceful dance upon the pole, light as a swallow.

She danced above the blades, risking death to garner their favor. But skilled as she was, she inadvertently glanced down at the rows upon rows of wicked knives as she went in for the landing. In that brief moment of panic, her bamboo pole tilted infinitesimally. Alarmed cries rang out from the crowd as she fell.

Though she managed to avoid the densest thicket of knives, she still skirted the edge, slashing her legs open. The crowd cried out again as blood spattered across the road. She ignored the pain and got swiftly to her feet, offering a smile as she lowered her head in apology.

The spectators sneered.

"The little missy's skills aren't quite up to the task. You'd better practice a little more," said one.

“That’s right, you gotta work harder if you wanna make a living. You won’t get far with half-assed dabbling,” scoffed another.

A few of the kinder people, their eyes brimming with tears, were more sympathetic. “Ay, enough already. Look at the poor girl’s injury. Hurry along to the apothecary, dear, and get some medicine.”

“I don’t…” The woman hesitated. “I don’t have any money for medicine…”

The sympathetic ones faltered. Some sighed, while others lifted their hands to their jades and pearls, but none spoke. A few dabbed at the corners of their eyes, as if deeply moved.

“How pitiful.”

“Indeed, indeed.”

“Seeing as your life is so difficult, I’ll give you some money,” said an elderly woman with a big belly. She produced her bulging purse, fished out a handful of gold leaflets, then held them in her hand and kept digging. Finally, she unearthed three copper coins. She weighed them in her hand, returned two to her swollen pouch, then, very solemnly, placed one copper coin in Mo Ran’s mother’s palm. Having given generously, the elderly woman allowed twin tracks of well-earned tears to roll down her cheeks. In tones of deep benevolence, she said, “Miss, you deserve this. Take it.”

“Thank you…” the woman murmured hollowly, clutching the copper coin for which she had risked her life.

Thank you…

And what of that wealthy madam who had promised ten taels of gold? She had already stomped off, cursing. The woman staggered after her on bleeding legs. She wanted to ask for the money, but the madam’s attendants shoved her to the ground, cursing so loudly they could be heard a whole street over.

“What terrible luck!”

“Our madam must keep her baby safe! The sight of blood is inauspicious! Master will be worried sick if he hears.”

“You still have the nerve to ask for money! You call that a dance? You’re just lucky your blood didn’t get on our madam, or else—or else there’d be hell to pay!”

“Scram!”

The woman was thrown roughly to the ground. But this madam and her attendants were of an affluent and influential family in Linyi—no one was willing to stick their neck out for her. She twisted in pain on the ground, writhing like an insect in the dirt.

No one helped her up. No one would open their purse for her. She had danced with her life on the line, all in exchange for a single, cold copper coin. The kind woman who’d laid it in her palm said it was what she deserved.

She spared not a thought for herself—but she had earned only one coin today. What could she buy with that? A single piece of flatbread without any filling, not even a bowl of congee to go with it. And with her leg hurt, she wouldn’t be able to dance tomorrow, and what about her little boy… He was still so small, so skinny, and now he would go hungry again…

That thought pushed her over the edge. She curled up there in the mud and wept miserably, her voice raw and shuddering. The onlookers were unable to bear the sound. They sighed and began to disperse.

Just then, a dirty, foul-smelling child burst through the crowd.

“Mom! *Mom!*” Mo Ran ran to her, yelling like a trapped beast. He hugged her. A lowly child clutching his lowly mother. Like a bug clinging to grass, like a straw dog[20] clutching at duckweed.

Surprise and panic flashed in the woman's eyes at the sight of him. She may have been weak, but mothers were strong. She stopped crying at once—life was already hard enough, every day like falling asleep in hell and waking in the same—she didn't want her son to see her weak and helpless. The tears on her face were still wet as she quickly arranged her features into a smile. "Aiya, look at you, what are you doing here? Mom is fine. It's just a scratch… Oh, but look…"

She stuffed the clammy copper coin clenched in her hand into his small palm. Mo Ran shook his head over and over, tears carving tracks through the grime on his little face.

"There, that's enough for a piece of flatbread. Go on… Go buy one; Mom will wait for you right here. Then we can go home."

Home? Where was home? That decrepit old storage shed? Or that sheep pen they'd slept in, only to be chased out two days later…

Mo Ran fought back sobs. Fire burned in his eyes as he said, "Just sit here and rest for a while, Mom."

"What're you going to—don't do anything foolish—"

Mo Ran dashed over and picked up a knife. He shouted loud and clear in his still-young voice to capture the attention of the dispersing crowd. "Lords and ladies, please wait! Please wait! We still have a special performance for your lordships and ladyships! Please spare a glance—"

Mo Ran had possessed innate spiritual energy since he was a child. Even if he'd never cultivated it, he was much stronger than an ordinary person without aptitude. The boy held the sharp and sturdy blade in his hands. With a low cry, he broke it in two and tossed the pieces to the ground.

The crowd was astonished, and the few cultivators among them even more so. "Hey, the kid's not bad."

“One more!” called Mo Ran. He picked up two knives this time and snapped both together.

“Nice!” Someone in the crowd clapped.

“Do three!”

The little boy added another knife, and another, and the crowd grew more and more lively as the stack grew thicker and harder to break.

“Gege, Jiejie! Uncles and aunties! Please spare some tips and I’ll add more.”

The people were eager for a show. They tossed the cheapest copper coins they could find onto the ground before him. For the sake of those coins, Mo Ran added knife after knife, until his hands were slick with blood, and he really couldn’t break one more. The carrion vultures flapped their night-black wings and scattered.

Mo Ran picked up those copper coins, cupping them carefully in his dirty little hands, and walked over to his dazed and teary mother.

“Mom,” he smiled. “We can get you medicine now.”

Her tears fell, uncontrollable. “My child… My good boy… Let Mom see your hands…”

“I’m okay…” His smile was bright and pure. It scorched her heart.

She pulled her son into her arms and hugged him tight. “It’s all Mom’s fault that I can’t take care of you,” she sobbed. “I’ve made you suffer so much from such a young age…”

“It’s all right,” Mo Ran said quietly, wrapped in his mother’s arms. “I don’t mind as long as I’m with you, Mom. We’ll get through it together, and when I grow up, I’ll give you a good life.”

She smiled and wiped the tears from her eyes. “It’s all right if it’s not a good life. As long as you grow up strong and healthy, that would

be fine…that would be enough."

Mo Ran nodded vigorously. Then he suddenly said, quietly, "Mom, if I make something of myself in the future, you'll never have to put up with this again. I'll make all those people just now apologize to you, and if they won't, then I'll make *them* dance on knives. I—"

"Silly child. Don't think like that." The kind, gentle woman stroked her son's hair as she whispered, "Absolutely don't think like that. Don't hold grudges. I want to watch you grow up to be a good kid. Promise me you'll be a good, kind person. Okay?"

Mo Ran was so young back then, like a small and tender seedling —just a gentle nudge and he would lean easily in a certain direction— and his mother, uneducated but pure, was his first lighthouse. And so little Mo Ran thought it over for a bit, rather puzzled. In the end he said, with an air of seriousness. "Okay, Mom. I promise. Then… Then in the future, if…if I make something of myself, I'll build lots of houses for people without homes, and plant lots of food for people who don't have enough to eat. That way, no one will ever have to live like us again."

The woman stared blankly for a while, then sighed. "That would be wonderful."

The little boy nodded in agreement and echoed, "That would be wonderful."

At that moment, neither imagined that a child who could say words like this would later tread through fields of bone with his hands laved in blood, bringing the stench of misery and ruin as vultures and crows wheeled overhead—that he would become Emperor Taxian-jun, scourge of the common people.

And Emperor Taxian-jun, that scourge of the common people, rarely, if ever, looked back on this chapter of his past. He did not honor the promise he made in his mother's arms that day, that promise spoken

solemnly, with clear eyes and a tender voice.

Back then, under his mother's guidance, however hard things got, Mo Ran never hated anyone—though he did feel somewhat unsatisfied.

Day after day passed just like this. Streetside performances were novel to the passersby the first time around, boring the second, and irritating by the third. Eventually, Mo Ran and his mother could no longer earn a single copper coin with their work and could only resort to begging.

Mo Ran remembered a kid from a wealthy merchant family. He was around Mo Ran's own age and had a big mole by the corner of his mouth. He remembered that kid sitting by the gate of his family's sprawling courtyard with a bowl held in his hand. The kid was probably still learning to use chopsticks well, so he ate the golden, crispy fried dumplings in the bowl by jabbing each one with the bamboo sticks. He was a picky eater and would only eat the filling, then spit the wrappers out and toss them to the ground for the dogs.

Mo Ran walked over with cautious steps and stood carefully to the side.

When the kid saw how dirty and smelly this little boy was, he started. "Who are you?!" he screeched.

"Young master," Mo Ran asked quietly, "the dumpling wrappers… Could…could I have them?"

"You want me to give them to you? Why would I give them to you?"

"You…you're not eating them anyway, so I just thought I'd ask…"

"So what if I don't eat them? Our Wangcai will." The boy pointed to the pair of fat dogs with sleek coats and said huffily, "We can hardly keep our dogs fed as it is, how could I give them to you?!"

Mo Ran smiled deferentially. “Then, if the dogs don’t finish them…”

“As if they wouldn’t! They get braised meat every day and even that’s not enough. These are just dumpling wrappers, two bites and they’re gone. Either way, none for you! Now, shoo, shoo!”

On hearing the words *braised meat*, Mo Ran couldn’t help but look at those dogs. All of a sudden he thought—with how fat they were—if cooked, they would be… He stared at the dogs and swallowed hard.

The boy noticed. He froze for a second, then yelled in shock, “What are you up to?!”

“I—nothing…I just…”

“You want to *eat* Wangcai and Wangfu?”

“N-no!” Mo Ran denied it in a panic. “I was just really hungry and couldn’t help thinking about it, sorry…”

But the little young master had stopped listening. At the words *couldn’t help thinking about it*, the blood drained from his face. How could a well-fed young master possibly comprehend that someone might think of his adorable little watchdogs as food? This kid was a freak. Frightened, he started screaming his head off. “Somebody come! Hurry! Chase him away!”

The household servants crowded around Mo Ran, kicking and punching him before he could say another word. Under that heavy rain of blows, he scrambled to grab as many of the fried dumpling wrappers as he could. No matter how hard they kicked, he held them tightly in his hands and wouldn’t let go.

The little young master was terrified. He tossed the remaining dumplings to the ground along with his chopsticks and scurried away.

Mo Ran crawled over inch by arduous inch, dragging his small,

skinny body that had been pummeled blue and purple. One of his eyes was too painful to open—the work of a well-placed kick—yet he smiled happily as he reached out and grabbed those leftover dumplings. There were two left. With the filling still in them… One for him, one for his mom…Or both for his mom, just the wrappers were plenty for him…

But before he could leave with his prize, one of the servants' feet came down in the chaos and crushed those dumplings skewered on the bamboo chopstick. The crispy wrappers cracked, and the ground meat filling was mashed to paste.

Mo Ran gripped the dirty, broken chopstick in a daze as kicks and punches rained down on him. He couldn't feel the pain, yet because those dumplings could no longer be eaten, his tears began to fall, squeezed out between swollen eyelids to stream down that small face, so dirty his features were hard to make out. All he had wanted was another child's leftover, unwanted food. Why would they rather waste it, crush it, smear it into paste, than let him have it?

Later, when Mo Ran became a young master of Sisheng Peak, many within the sect tried to suck up to him and curry his favor. On his birthday, he was inundated with gifts and well-wishes from people he'd hardly ever spoken to.

The child who had once crawled on the ground and scrabbled for discarded dumpling wrappers was now praised and fawned over left and right. And yet—standing before that pile of attentively selected presents, he found himself gripped by a vague sense of dread.

He was afraid those presents would disappear, that they would be smashed, that something unexpected would happen and everything would be crushed underfoot like those dumplings he had once held but never gotten to eat. And so, out of that mountain of gifts, he quickly used what was usable and ate what was edible. As for everything else,

he dug out a secret little compartment in his room and carefully hid those splendid gifts inside, counting them every day once, then twice, just to be sure.

Xue Meng had made fun of him, pointing and laughing. “Ha ha ha! It’s just a box of pastries from Lin’an’s Breeze Bakery. If they go bad or go to waste, big deal! But look at you, shoving them all down your throat in one sitting. Did you starve to death in your last life or something? No one’s gonna fight you for them.”

Mo Ran had only recently arrived at Sisheng Peak then, and truthfully still felt profoundly uneasy and insecure. So he only grinned in the face of his cousin’s mockery, crumbs still clinging to the corner of his mouth, then lowered his head and opened another box of pastries.

Xue Meng was amazed. “What an appetite! Aren’t you stuffed?”

Mo Ran kept eating without a word.

After a pause, Xue Meng said, “If you’re full, don’t force yourself to eat. I get tons of pastries every year for my birthday too, but who can eat that many…”

Mo Ran’s cheeks were stuffed and bulging. He was actually choking a little from eating too quickly. He glanced at Xue Meng, sitting across from him, with teary black eyes. In that moment, he suddenly recalled that little young master he had met as a child, the one who could be as picky about his food as he liked, who ate the filling from his fried dumplings and tossed the wrappers to his dogs. Xue Meng had probably grown up like that too. That’s why he could so easily say things like *Just toss it if you can’t finish it*, and *No one’s gonna fight you for them.*

Mo Ran really, really, really envied them.

Now that he was leading a life of luxury as the young master of a famed sect, he should by all rights be able to feel comfortable and

secure, and waste and squander as he pleased. But he didn't dare. Instead, he picked up his cup and swallowed several mouthfuls of water to wash down the pastries obstructing his throat. Then, he forced himself to eat more.

Later still, he became Emperor Taxian-jun.

Everything under the skies belonged to him. The most gorgeous beauties, the finest wines, the most exquisite delicacies, gold and silver, pearls and jades, and treasured artifacts alike were gifted to him in a never-ending stream from every corner of the world.

One day, a wealthy ore merchant arrived from Lin'an with a rare, ten-thousand-year-old black fire jade that had been discovered while mining. He declared that he wished to give it to Emperor Taxian-jun.

These types—people who came bearing gifts of treasure in hopes of a noble title or official post, or otherwise tried to ingratiate themselves with the emperor and win his favor—were too numerous to count. Mo Ran usually ignored them.

But on this day, it just so happened that Chu Wanning had come down with a cold. Mo Ran frowned slightly. Black fire jade was excellent for warming the body. He'd prefer for that invalid to get better quick; he was a goddamn eyesore lying around in bed all day… Thus he agreed to see this wealthy merchant.

The merchant was around his own age, stocky, with a large mole at the corner of his lip from which a hair poked out. Mo Ran sat upon the throne in Wushan Palace, his slender hands tented before him and the tips of his fingers resting against his chin. He stared down silently until the greasy merchant's legs went weak and sweat soaked his back.

A long moment passed before the merchant, shaking from head to toe and lips aquiver, fell to his knees and began to kowtow again and again. "Your Majesty. This lowly one…this lowly one…" He stammered

for quite a while without managing to say anything at all, his corpulent body trembling under his gold-embroidered clothing all the while.

Mo Ran smiled. He may have only seen this person once in his life, but he could never forget him.

That year, that kid—the one with the mole by the corner of his lip, who had sat before his family's extravagant residence displaying the kind of lavish mannerisms that Mo Ran had never imagined he himself would ever possess. There he'd sat, jabbing his bowl of golden dumplings with his bamboo chopsticks, a greasy sheen on his lips to match the sheen on the crispy dumpling skins.

"You know," Mo Ran said, still smiling, "the fried dumplings at your place are delicious." He'd never actually tasted them, but he had obsessed over them for half a lifetime. From his seat on the throne, Mo Ran observed the man at his feet go from terrified to astounded to bewildered to sycophantic. He muttered obsequiously that he'd send his chef to Sisheng Peak right away as a gift to Emperor Taxian-jun.

Mo Ran had seen it then, clear as day—how many in this world would rather kneel to lick the boots of the strong than reach down to show the weak the tiniest mote of sympathy or kindness.

Mo Ran shook his head, trying to shake off these memories of bygone days. He rarely reminisced about his past, unwilling to dwell on this weakness of his. But the ordeal of asking, door by door, and being rejected, door by door, was so like those scenes of his past that the fetters deep within his mind fell open against his will. For a time, he was caught up in the darkness of his past.

He stared off in a daze. So he *had* once promised his mother, when he was young, that he wouldn't hold grudges, had promised he would build countless houses to shelter all the people in this world who didn't

have homes, so that everyone could smile… But he hadn't kept his word.

And in the end, he had caused the death of the last person who treated him well. He had caused Chu Wanning's death, caused his own shizun's death.

Chu Wanning…

Mo Ran's heart ached at the thought of him. Absently, he reached into his robes and took out that flimsy sheet of paper bearing Chu Wanning's likeness. The paper had become a bit wrinkled. He pressed his lips together and wordlessly raised a hand, intending to smooth it out. But at his touch, blood smeared across the paper.

He jerked his hand back in a panic, afraid to dirty the portrait. He didn't dare touch it again.

He walked from the fifth street to the third street, asking at every door, unwilling to give up. But every ghost said the same: they'd never seen the man in the portrait.

He strode through the endless night. It was so dark, so long, that he began to suspect he'd never reach the dawn, no matter how he tried or how far he walked. Mo Ran finally felt fatigue setting in. He hadn't had a thing to eat or drink, and by this point was nearing his limits. By luck, he spotted a stall hawking wontons[21] at the side of the street, so he went over and bought a bowl, which he sneakily ate out of sight of the ghosts.

All the food in the underworld was cold. No steam rose off the wontons. Mo Ran brought out the soul-calling lantern, scooped up a wonton, and held it out to the lantern. "Does Shizun want some?"

Shizun, of course, couldn't answer.

So Mo Ran ate the whole bowl himself. "Then again," he said between mouthfuls, "you never did care for wontons. All you like are

sweets. Once I find you and we get back home, I'll make you pastries every day."

In the silent night, one youth and one lantern sat by the lonely wonton stall. A breeze rustled past, bringing with it an occasional withered leaf. In this moment, even the underworld seemed serene.

"Peach blossom cake, osmanthus sweets, walnut crisp, cloud cake…" he listed all these to the lantern while ticking them off on his fingers, as if in doing so, he might entice Chu Wanning to respond. After he'd listed a good number, he forced himself to smile and asked, "Shizun, where is your other earth soul?"

The young man extended his slender hand and gently caressed the silk surface of the lantern. Just as he had that year he turned thirty, when Chu Wanning died. When he had held the man's body in his arms and stared blankly into the distance and muttered, "Chu Wanning, I really hate you so much"—then lowered his head and pressed his lips to that cold cheek.

"You new 'round here, son?"

Suddenly, a voice like a broken gong spoke by his ear. The old man hawking the wontons was terribly nearsighted and had felt his way over to sit next to Mo Ran. This man had probably died of old age in his own bed; his face, tanned dark by the sun, was wizened and lined like a poplar tree in the desert. He produced a smoking pipe from somewhere in his burial clothes, placed it between his teeth, and began chatting with Mo Ran with that kindly nosiness unique to the elderly.

Mo Ran sniffled, then turned to flash him a grin. "Mn, first day."

"No wonder I don't recognize you. If you don't mind me asking, how'd you go so young?"

"Qi deviation."

"Oh…" The old man inhaled smoke from his pipe, though it

remained dark and unlit. “A cultivator, eh?”

“Mn,” Mo Ran nodded and cast him a glance. Without much hope, he once again withdrew that portrait scroll from his robes and asked, “Gramps, I’m looking for someone. This is my shizun. He’s new here, too. Would you happen to have seen him?”

The old man accepted the drawing and hunched over closer to the light. He squinted at it for a quite a long while through cataract-clouded eyes. Mo Ran heaved a sigh and reached out to retrieve it. “It’s all right, I’ve already asked lots of people. It’s okay if you don’t know either. Everyone else—”

“I’ve seen him.”

Mo Ran jolted. The blood in his veins coursed faster as he clutched at the old man’s arm. “Gramps, you’ve seen him?! Y-you’re sure?”

“I’m sure.” The old man crossed one leg over the other and reached over to pick at his foot. “Don’t see lookers like that every day. It was definitely your shizun.”

Mo Ran had already shot to his feet, but then felt he’d been rude and bowed respectfully to the old man. He looked up. “Gramps,” he said earnestly, “please point the way.”

“Aiya, no need to be so polite, son. We’re all in the same boat down here, just ghosts waiting to pass on to the next life. We’ve only got eight or ten years before this life’s memories are gone for good. My own son passed too early, so I’ve got a soft spot for you young’uns.” He wiped the tears from his eyes and blew his nose into his sleeve, then finally asked, “You seen that grand-looking palace on the first street up there?”

“I have. That’s where my shizun is?”

“Yup, he’s in there. It’s the Fourth Ghost King’s second palace,” the old man sighed. “The ghost king doesn’t actually live there. He built it

to lock up all the beauties his lackeys snatch from the underworld. That Fourth Ghost King is a real lecher. He comes down here now and then to take his pick of concubines from the second palace—men and women both. He takes those he picks back to the fourth level of hell, and the ones he doesn't are supposedly given to his underlings as playthings." The old man sighed again. "The world nowadays—"

He was still sighing when the little cultivator beside him scooped the lantern into his arms in an anxious flurry and charged off into the night like a hound on a scent.

The old man watched in silence for a second, then muttered, not without a dash of envy, "Must be nice to be young, to be able to run so fast…"

Chapter 111:
Shizun Is Like a Blade, You Are Like Water

THE FOURTH GHOST KING'S second palace had only one entrance, and there were guards stationed outside. Not that Mo Ran was so dumb as to saunter in through the front door. He vaulted up onto the roof, tucked the soul-calling lantern into his qiankun pouch so its light wouldn't draw any unnecessary attention, then flitted across the roof tiles, swift as a bolt of black lightning.

As grand as the second palace appeared from the street, the interior was still more massive. Courtyard after courtyard of winding corridors sprawled beneath his feet. Mo Ran leapt to the top of one of the taller buildings and flattened himself against the dark brown tiles of the roof. From his high vantage, the second palace looked like a small town that stretched as far as the eye could see.

Mo Ran was unbearably anxious. He understood now why that man in the doorway wouldn't tell him where his shizun had gone—he was probably afraid to tick off this ghost king. But though Mo Ran knew that Chu Wanning was here in this palace, he still had no idea what to do about it. There were at least nine hundred rooms here, if not a thousand. Which of them held his shizun?

Mo Ran was like someone on the cusp of finding a treasure, both his hands and heart alike tremoring violently.

Shizun…where are you?

He was absorbed in these thoughts when a line of soldiers outfitted in golden armor and battle boots stomped around a corner, each bearing a red lantern. They marched single file from the east gate

to the main walkway, and after many convoluted bends and turns, arrived at an unremarkable side room.

A massive old pagoda tree stood before this room, neatly blocking Mo Ran's line of sight. He could see only half of the courtyard, the other half hidden behind lush foliage.

The ghostly soldiers entered. Chaos followed—there came shouts and the sounds of tables and chairs being knocked over. Then a frightened scream pierced the air, and a disheveled woman was dragged out and tossed into the courtyard. Her clothes, already half falling off, slipped further under the rough handling, exposing large expanses of snowy skin.

"Trying to run?! Trying to fucking run?!"

A whip cracked viciously down on the woman's body. This was undoubtedly a punishment tool of the underworld; it could inflict searing, unbearable agony even on ghosts. The woman curled up on the ground, trembling. She looked as if she wanted to run, but there was nowhere to go—she was hemmed in by soldiers on all sides.

"Fuckin' bitch! You think you can just leave the fourth king's palace?"

"I lived a virtuous life!" the woman shrieked. "I did nothing wrong! Why are you doing this to me? Let me go, I want to reincarnate! I don't want to stay here—!" Her words turned into wails as the lash came down again.

"Serving the fourth king frees you from suffering the cycle of reincarnation! You sure don't know what's good for you!"

"He didn't even choose me! Why won't you let me leave? I—*Ah!*" Another lash, this time across her face. The woman wept, shivering uncontrollably, yet still tried to crawl away. Her animalistic desperation seemed to amuse the Fourth Ghost King's soldiers. All of them laughed

uproariously. One after another, more “tributes” were dragged from the side room.

The leader of the soldiers raised his voice: “Everyone’s been working hard, and I know how bored you all get. These here are the fourth king’s leftovers; go ahead and pick a few to play with. If any in particular strikes your fancy, come register with me and you can take them home for yourself.”

Those lecherous ghosts howled and laughed as they crowded into the room to pick the comeliest goods. The woman outside wasn’t spared, either—she was instantly boxed in by several people under the tree. They lunged at her, like a pack of starving wolves intent on ripping her soul to pieces.

The sounds of rough breathing and obscene words rose and fell inside the room. There were people crying, screaming, begging. There were also those who couldn’t handle the torment and wanted out, who submitted to everything and did all that they could to earn favor. Whether in the underworld or living world, people all had this same ugliness.

Mo Ran jumped nimbly off the tall building onto the roof of the side chamber, carefully hidden under the cover of night. If what the old man at the wonton stall told him was correct, Chu Wanning had come here only recently. He wouldn’t have been here long enough to go through the ghost king’s selection process, so he shouldn’t be among these castoffs. But Mo Ran couldn’t help his worry. He pried a piece of the dark brown roof tiles up a sliver and stealthily peeked through the gap. The room smelled of sex, hot and heavy. And in that mess of debauchery, Mo Ran spied a familiar face.

Rong Jiu.

That prostitute he had favored in his last life, who had taken

advantage of Mo Ran's fondness to scheme against him and try to steal his cultivation. He was in there as well.

Rong Jiu was a clever thing. He knew death as well as he knew life. Many in the room below struggled desperately, refusing to give in. Amidst that hazy chaos, some called the names of their lovers in life, while others cursed and fought for their dignity. But Rong Jiu was different. Mo Ran knew what he was like—he loved money and he loved his life. He no longer had a life to love, of course, but he still valued his soul and had no desire to suffer.

Atop the sheets of that wide, rumpled bed, the other unpicked tributes struggled and pleaded. Only Rong Jiu had his eyes closed, mewling as softly as a kitten as he let the soldiers manhandle him without a word of complaint. At the sight of Rong Jiu's face flushed with arousal, Mo Ran felt a chill pierce his heart. He thought of Chu Wanning.

Rong Jiu was soft and pliant. Chu Wanning was firm as steel. Anyone could see he was cold and hard as black iron, unbending and unyielding. In a situation like this, Rong Jiu would flatter and fawn, would lie back and use his softness to build himself an invulnerable fortress. As for Chu Wanning? Mo Ran didn't even have to think about it. He knew what that person would do—he'd sooner scatter his soul and fall into the eighteen hells than allow anyone to touch him. Running water never breaks, but steel blades snap.

A sudden *bang* startled those in the room below as well as the one on the roof above. Mo Ran raised his head to look toward the courtyard, and his face blanched. The woman from before, the one fierce as an inferno, had been run through by one of the soldiers. Tears slid down her cheeks as her soul gradually faded to transparency.

For an instant, everything froze. Then her figure dissolved into

countless specks—her soul had scattered.

The soldier who had struck her cursed as he got to his feet. There was a lash mark stark across his face—the woman had likely wrested away his ghost-suppression whip and struck him with it. “Fucking wench!” the soldier spat. “Already dead and still so damn prissy, bah! Stupid bitch!”

Mo Ran felt like he had fallen into an icebound cave. It was as if the one he had seen just now wasn’t some woman he didn’t even know, but Chu Wanning himself, and the choice he would have made.

Rong Jiu was still tumbling in bed with those lecherous ghosts. This was a skill he had honed for survival: he would attach himself to someone sturdy like a climbing vine and engulf them in his softness like a trap.

One by one, the tributes in the room submitted, the stench of sex heavy and nauseating. Mo Ran didn’t know how long passed before the curtain finally fell on the lurid spectacle below.

Rong Jiu really did know how to charm people. One of the soldiers pulled on his pants and immediately went to register with his leader. All that was left was for the fourth king to look it over, and the soldier would be free to bring Rong Jiu home. These ghost soldiers were subordinates of the fourth king and were therefore exempt from the cycle of reincarnation. Although it wasn’t quite as advantageous as joining the retinue of the fourth king himself, sticking with these guys would still net Rong Jiu a fairly comfortable life free from humiliation. Rong Jiu was quite content with that.

The soldier who’d petitioned to bring Rong Jiu home flirted with him for a few minutes longer before leaving for guard duty. The group of fiends marched away into the distance, leaving the side room in disarray. It was dreary and cheerless, like the aftermath of a feast,

leftover wine and sentiments spilt over the floor to grow cold.

Rong Jiu sat up languidly. Despite being a man, he was the most composed of the group. He dressed and groomed himself. As he gazed into the copper mirror, he felt that his face looked much too pallid in death compared to the rosy glow he'd enjoyed in life, and it didn't complement his coquettish gazes. And so, ignoring those sobbing, dazed, trembling women, Rong Jiu cheerily straightened out his clothes, slipped on a pair of silk shoes, and strolled into the courtyard.

Hell had rouge flowers as well, of an even deeper red than those that bloomed in the world of the living. He picked a cluster of the flowers, then dipped the tip of a slim finger into the sap to paint his lips and blush his cheeks.

Everyone had their own priorities. Rong Jiu had led a difficult life since birth. In his eyes, only the affluent, who stood high above the rest and never had to worry about going hungry, had the leisure to chase after things such as friendship. As for himself, he was merely some dirty thing in the mud. He couldn't afford to care about integrity and honor or whatnot. All he had was his life, and now that even that was gone, all he had was his soul.

He heard a slight rustling behind him, like someone had brushed past the flowers. Rong Jiu thought the soldier who'd taken a liking to him had doubled back, so he laded his gaze with a generous helping of affection—everything cost money, only affection was free—and cast a coy glance back. He appeared exceedingly beautiful and charming, indistinguishable between male and female. But when he saw who it was standing coldly next to the flowers, Rong Jiu recoiled. He backed up a step, his eyes wide open and lips parted slightly, as though he had been struck by lightning.

"You?!"

“Me,” said Mo Ran.

Rong Jiu’s soft, pretty face cycled through a wild array of expressions: shock, hesitation, smugness, anger, apprehension, feigned nonchalance. Finally, he settled on cool and detached. He was too accustomed to wearing a smile. Those overly intense and ferocious expressions felt heavy on his face; he didn’t feel like burdening himself with them.

“Fancy seeing you here, Mo-gongzi.” The two had parted on terrible terms last they’d met. Rong Jiu straightened his spine and affected an air of studied indifference.

“I’m looking for someone,” Mo Ran said.

Rong Jiu scoffed. “Who would’ve thought? A philanderer like Mo-gongzi, so attached to someone even in death.”

Mo Ran didn’t feel like wasting his breath on Rong Jiu. He took out the scroll and handed it over. “Have you seen him?”

Rong Jiu gave the drawing a quick glance. “Eh, average-looking,” he sneered. “Which brothel is he from?”

Mo Ran frowned. “What do you mean ‘brothel.’ Just tell me if you’ve seen him.”

“Nope,” Rong Jiu said indifferently. “And I wouldn’t tell you even if I had.”

Mo Ran eyed him.

“I’m tired now, gotta go get some beauty rest. Please see yourself out and go back wherever you came from.”

“Rong Jiu!” Mo Ran called out to him.

That slim figure paused, and his pretty face turned slightly, his expression smug. “Yes?”

“I’m going to rescue him. I’ll rescue you, too, if you want. This

place is ruthless. Surely you don't mean to stay here and hang around with those soldiers. You should go reincarnate."

Rong Jiu turned a bit more. "Easy for you to say, Mo-gongzi," he said sweetly. "Sure, this place may be ruthless—but what place isn't? Little ol' me lived a tough twenty years up there, and honestly, it's not much different down here, except that my patrons are now ghosts instead of humans. What does it matter if I reincarnate or not?"

Mo Ran paused. "If you stay here, you'll be living under a knife."

Rong Jiu burst into laughter. After a moment, he pulled himself together, still chuckling as he looked Mo Ran over. "When have I *not* lived under a knife? People are knives. I'm just the meat on their chopping block. If I'm lucky and get someone nice, maybe they'll pay me a little more. But if I get someone 'extra nice' like Mo-gongzi, getting stiffed is the least of it. You stole from me and then turned around and pretended you didn't even know me. Mo-gongzi, first you stab me, then you warn me of knives—how *very* considerate of you."

Chapter 112:
Shizun Is Not to Be Sullied

RONG JIU WAS OF COURSE referring to Mo Ran's actions on that first day of his reborn life, when he had been full of resentment. Thinking back on it now, while it was true that Rong Jiu had wronged him in the last lifetime, in which he had teamed up with Chang-gongzi to scheme against Mo Ran's life, none of that had happened in this one. This Rong Jiu hadn't yet gotten that far in his plot with Chang-gongzi, and Mo Ran really had no good explanation for having taken his money and things back then.

That being the case, Mo Ran didn't want to fight. "It was my bad," he said. "Everything I took from you that day, I'll return in the future."

"And how do you intend to do that?" Rong Jiu asked. "Or rather, what good would money and earthly treasures do me now?"

Mo Ran could think of nothing to say.

"You can return the bracelets and pearls to me, but what about my life?"

"What?" Mo Ran was caught off guard. "Your life?"

"Yes, my life." Rong Jiu's expression clouded over, the topic still clearly a raw wound in his heart. "Do you know how I died?"

Mo Ran did not reply.

Rong Jiu had likely been holding this in for quite some time, and now that the lid was lifted, the steam beneath burst out in a torrent. His face flashed with a rage that slowly grew twisted, and before Mo Ran could say a word, he continued wretchedly, "That Chang guy was ruthless. Once you cast me aside, I had no further value to him. He fed

me some lies about how he really, truly liked me, but his family objected because I was a prostitute in a brothel, not clean, and said it'd be best if we stopped seeing each other. I was blind back then. I thought his feelings were sincere, that he had no choice, that his parents made him…bah! I can't believe I fell for that garbage!"

"Well, what are you blaming me for," Mo Ran said. "Shouldn't you blame that Chang guy?"

"Why *shouldn't* I blame you?" Rong Jiu snapped angrily, "I had enough saved up to buy my freedom, and you stole it. I was too miserable to stay at the brothel any longer, but I couldn't leave without money, so I ran away in secret. If you hadn't robbed me, I wouldn't have ended up like this!"

"You ran away?"

"That's right, I ran away. I ran to *his* place." Rong Jiu's tone was hateful. "But that Chang guy wouldn't open the door for me, even when the people the brothel sent after me were closing in. All my struggles were futile in the end. They dragged me back there, beat me to a pulp, and locked me up."

"But that Chang character said you died when you went to visit relatives in Butterfly Town and the ghost realm barrier broke," Mo Ran muttered.

"Hah!" There was a shade of mockery on Rong Jiu's androgynous face. "How shameless can he be. Relatives? What *relatives* could I possibly have in Butterfly Town!"

Mo Ran had no reply to that.

"What's that you said about living under a knife? I'll tell you what it means to live under a knife!" Rong Jiu was getting more and more worked up, his features more and more twisted. In that moment, he truly looked like a vicious ghost. "I'll tell you how I died! You and all

my other dear patrons! Ha ha—patrons!

"I was locked up in the brothel for ages without food, starving and suffering. Not a soul cared whether I lived or died. Days passed like that. I was just about to give up hope when that Chang guy turned up again. He came crying, telling me he couldn't let me in that day because his parents were in a bad mood and he was afraid if he did, they'd have the servants beat me to death!"

Mo Ran shook his head. It was obviously a lie. "Surely you didn't believe him?"

"No." There were motes of light quivering in Rong Jiu's eyes. "I believed him."

Mo Ran was speechless.

"I believed him." Rong Jiu bared his teeth and smiled through his resentment, the corners of his mouth curling. "Why wouldn't I? Doubt is the privilege of those with a way out. What am I but a peddler of flesh? If I didn't believe whatever people threw at me, how could I survive?" He paused. "That Chang guy said he would be true to his word and take me into his home, but that his parents couldn't accept me just yet. So he asked me to go with him to a nearby town and live there for a short time first."

"Butterfly Town?"

"Yes. Butterfly Town."

Mo Ran's expression darkened. He already knew where this was headed.

Sure enough, Rong Jiu continued, "So I happily packed my things. Actually, there wasn't much to pack, since you stole everything I earned selling my body all those years on a lark. But that's all right, I thought at the time, I have Chang-gongzi now. Heh…" He was silent for a spell, his lips twitching with a soft snicker. Then he hatefully spat out the name

again. “Chang-gongzi.”

“So, he tricked you into going to Butterfly Town and then killed you there?”

Rong Jiu paused again. “No.” He wore a savage smile, and bitterness flickered in his eyes. “He wasn’t the one who killed me. It was all of you, who blocked my paths one by one until I had no choice but to accompany him on that shady venture. It was all of you. It was all of you who killed me.”

Rong Jiu took a deep breath. “When we arrived at Butterfly Town, I followed the Chang guy to a large manor. It was quiet and empty, and there were no servants. He said he hadn’t had a chance to decorate yet and told me to stay there and rest while he went out to make some purchases. So I stayed and waited. After a while, he came back with some man—”

Upon hearing this, Mo Ran’s expression shifted. “Did you see his face?”

“No,” said Rong Jiu. “He wore a mask and a cloak with the hood pulled up. I couldn’t see his face at all… And then I saw that Chang guy kneel before him, groveling even more pathetically than I do when I entertain guests. If he could have seen himself in a mirror just then—disgusting. He told the man I had residual wood elemental spiritual essence on me or some such thing, that I’d been intimate with you before—a good offering. Something like that. Who knows, I’m not a cultivator, nor do I want to be. I don’t know what they were on about.”

But Mo Ran felt his scalp go numb. It was true that he had been intimate with Rong Jiu before, and that would have left traces of wood elemental spiritual essence in his body. That fake Gouchen had been looking for a suitable replacement for the Heart-Pluck Willow. Although the lingering spiritual energy would be very faint, it would be pure—

indeed suitable for use in spells.

"There's not much to say about what happened next." Rong Jiu's usually easygoing expression now held a bone-chilling coldness. "As Mo-gongzi can see, I died."

If the Mo Ran before him had been that of the past life, or even the Mo Ran recently reborn, he would've scoffed and mocked, "So what if you died, what's it to me?"

But as he was now, Mo Ran couldn't find it in him to laugh. He *did* loathe Rong Jiu, and Rong Jiu *was* unscrupulous, a man who had gone so far as to plot his death in the last lifetime. But though he had been physically intimate with Rong Jiu before, never had they had an open, honest talk. Hearing such plain-spoken admissions from Rong Jiu now, down here in the underworld, filled Mo Ran with a hundred mixed emotions. He mulled it over and came to a decision: There was no way to untangle all these countless threads of bygone affairs. He might as well just let it go. He sighed. "I'm sorry about everything, Rong Jiu."

Rong Jiu was caught off guard. Not once in his whole life had anyone said sorry to him. He looked Mo Ran over with wide eyes, like he didn't recognize him. "Even if you say that, I'm still not going to tell you where to find that man in the drawing."

"This has nothing to do with the drawing."

Rong Jiu was still for a while, his head lowered. He suddenly spoke: "Mo-gongzi, did you know—Chang-gongzi was plotting with me to kill you and steal your cultivation."

"I know."

"You…you know?"

Mo Ran nodded. "I know."

Rong Jiu stared with blank eyes. Then he said resentfully, "That

Chang bastard must've ratted me out!" His head snapped back up, eyes aflame with hatred. "If I'd known it would end this way, I would've listened to him and killed you. At least then I might've enjoyed a good life, instead of dying miserably like I did."

Mo Ran gazed at him. "Do you always do whatever other people tell you to?"

"So what if I do?" Rong Jiu asked. "All I wanted was to live well. I sold my body, but what's wrong with that? Is it any different from selling fish or meat? It's merely a means to make a living. I knew all you young masters looked down on me, but it hardly mattered. What's the point of stuff like reputation and dignity? I'd rather have good wine and good meat. That's why, if I could've killed you back then and saved myself, why shouldn't I have?"

Mo Ran's lips moved slightly. He thought to retort, but then he remembered what he himself had done in his past life, and found he had no rebuttal to these words.

"People kill animals and eat their flesh in order to live," Rong Jiu spat, "so what's wrong with killing people in order to live?"

Mo Ran sighed. "Is there any meaning in living like that?" he murmured. The question was directed at Rong Jiu as much as it was at his past self, the one who sat high on his throne a lifetime ago.

"I don't know. I don't know what meaning is," Rong Jiu said dully. "I was sixteen when I was sold into the brothel, and my first customer was a cultivator in his fifties. What gives something meaning? *I* wouldn't know. When I was alive, all I wanted was money. Money could buy my freedom, and then I wouldn't have to bow and simper to anybody anymore. But I never got it, even until death, thanks to you beasts."

A long silence. "So if you could do it all over, you'd help that Chang fellow murder me?" Mo Ran finally asked.

“That’s right.”

“All right then, if I could do it over, I’d still turn around and filch all your money just to screw you over.”

“You—!” In his anger, the faint blush on Rong Jiu’s cheeks from the rouge flower was all the more vivid. His body swayed for a second before he slowly mastered himself. A minute passed. Rong Jiu was aware that he’d lost his composure. He reached up to tuck a few errant strands of hair into place, then pulled himself together and schooled his features into their usual coy smile. Still, anger flickered in his gaze. “You can say what you want. I can make my own way.”

“Enjoy your time in the underworld, then.”

Rong Jiu narrowed his eyes. “I fully intend to. All I have to do is lie back on the bed and I’ll be spared the misery of reincarnation for the rest of eternity. I know a good deal when I see it. Unlike those idiots back there, I’m more than willing.”

Mo Ran’s lips tugged up in a brief smile. “But Rong Jiu, those soldiers work for the Fourth Ghost King. Whether you live, whether you stay—it all hinges on his pleasure.”

Rong Jiu flinched. He was immediately on guard, staring at Mo Ran with those pretty eyes of his. “What are you trying to say?”

Mo Ran would have had no desire to go on quarreling with him even if the situation had been otherwise. But though Rong Jiu had a docile temperament, once he began to hate someone, he was unrelenting. Mo Ran did his utmost to remain calm as he spoke. “You may think the person in the drawing is average, but I think he’s great. Beauty is in the eye of the beholder, after all. Who’s to say the ghost king won’t take a shine to him?”

“With a frigid face like that? Who’d be into *him*?”

“You never know,” Mo Ran said. “If the ghost king liked the soft

type, then why didn't he pick you?"

Rong Jiu fell silent, but his expression darkened somewhat.

"He has a fierce temper," Mo Ran pressed. "If he gets picked, he'll probably flip the entire underworld upside down. And when the time comes to assign blame, the Fourth Ghost King's people definitely won't get off easy—some of those soldiers will hang for sure. If you wanna make like a climbing vine, at least climb a sturdy tree. If the tree topples over when you've barely coiled yourself around it, losing your support will be the least of your worries. Chances are you'll get uprooted right along with it, and that'll be a soul-scattering kind of end."

Rong Jiu's already pale face seemed to blanch further. But still he persisted, coy yet vicious: "I doubt any of that will happen."

Mo Ran said nothing.

"All right, Mo-gongzi, let's bet on it. I just can't stand to see you doing better than me."

A few moments passed in silence. Then Mo Ran turned vicious as well, his eyes fixed on Rong Jiu. "I'm not betting with you," he said. "I *will* rescue him, Rong Jiu. But if that's how you wanna play, then I'll put my life on the line."

Rong Jiu tipped his chin up, and something flickered in his gaze. His palm shot out to press against Mo Ran's chest like a serpent strike, like the sting of a scorpion. "Who is he to you? How long have you been lovers? Longer than the two of us? Is he better than me in bed? Is it that he knows more tricks, or that he cries out more prettily?" He paused, lashes lowering. "Mo-gongzi, you're not the kind of lovestruck fool who would risk your life for another. You hold no affection in your heart. You can't fool me."

He had barely finished when Mo Ran pinched his cheek painfully. Mo Ran peeled Rong Jiu's hand away, his ink-black brows drawn low

and fire glinting in his eyes. “I didn’t have a heart before. I do now.”

Rong Jiu’s eyes snapped up and locked onto Mo Ran’s face. He suddenly noticed that this person was scorching hot and even a little unfamiliar. The young man before him still appeared to be that free and easy Mo Weiyu, but there was something different about the soul inside.

Rong Jiu flinched like he had been burned by this kind of Mo Ran. He wanted to turn and run, but Mo Ran’s hand locked him firmly in place.

“And,” Mo Ran went on, “between him and me… From here on out, there will be no impropriety. I respect and love him without a single impure thought. Don’t you ever sully him again.”

At this, he shoved Rong Jiu away. Rong Jiu knocked into a column, staring incredulously at the person before him. He was too much in disbelief to notice the strangeness of the phrase, “from here on out, there will be no impropriety.” Had he his wits about him, he would’ve certainly realized the subtle implications behind those words.

No impropriety from here on out—that was to say, there had once indeed been impropriety.

But Rong Jiu didn’t catch that. “He isn’t your…isn’t your…”

“No,” Mo Ran said. “He’s my shizun.”

Rong Jiu fell silent. He was the type who could always sniff out even the most subtle of sentiments hidden within the words of others. Mo Ran himself might not recognize those feelings, but Rong Jiu could smell them. He was almost certain that Mo Ran loved the person in the portrait. As someone who had never managed to obtain anyone’s genuine affection, the thought filled him with bitter jealousy. So, there was someone even the dissolute Mo-gongzi would willingly risk life and limb to save.

Rong Jiu suddenly wondered: If he had been more sincere toward

Mo-gongzi back then—if he had been earnest and wholehearted—then might Mo Ran have also…shown him some real feeling?

He was still caught up in wondering when Mo Ran spoke again in a cold, vicious voice without the slightest hint of humor. “Rong Jiu. I will ask you where he is one last time. If you still claim not to know… well, I’m a cultivator, and I know of plenty of drugs and spells that will make a person talk. And if that fails, do you think I won’t take the plunge and go see the ghost king myself?”

Rong Jiu was completely dumbfounded now. “You…”

“I’ve committed every kind of transgression in my life,” he said softly, “but now I want to live properly. However, if no one will lend me a hand, then I’m still that same Mo Weiyu. Rong Jiu, think carefully before you answer. I’m not afraid to die, nor am I afraid of having my soul scattered. If you insist on standing in my way, I won’t hold back either.”

Neither spoke as they stared each other down: the resolute against the resentful, the unshakable against the unresigned, the fiery against the frosty. Then the ice in Rong Jiu’s eyes melted, as if defeated by the wildfire in Mo Ran’s oppressive gaze. Rong Jiu’s envy and hatred ran deep, but Mo Ran’s obsession was no shallow thing either. Head-to-head, he was no match for Emperor Taxian-jun.

Rong Jiu’s face was so ashen that even the vibrance of the rouge flower couldn’t disguise the gauntness of his cheeks, hollow as ruins and wreckage. “Why would you go so far for him?”

“He treated me better than anyone, but I tormented him like he was my worst enemy. I owe him.”

A long moment passed. At last, Rong Jiu whispered, “I really haven’t seen him.” Seeing Mo Ran’s expression, he added, slowly, “I’m not lying. But—I do know that all the newly captured ghosts are kept in

the biggest hall on the east side. They're locked in individual cells patrolled by the guards. You should be able to find him there."

Mo Ran didn't wait even a second; he turned and rushed off into the night. Rong Jiu stared after him distractedly, feet rooted in place. A strange, bitter feeling flooded his chest, and despite himself, he yelled after Mo Ran's retreating back, "Mo Weiyu, you—you want to lead a proper life *now*? Fat chance! You and I are both covered in filth! Neither of us gets a do-over on a proper life!

"Mo Weiyu! Just you wait—I'm going to live well; I'll do whatever I have to do to cling to life. Even if I have to sell my flesh and my soul, I'm going to live lavishly, even if my whole body rots away! Just you wait! You think you can just wash away the stench of blood? As if! The filth's in your bones! Go ahead and play at being reformed, and I'll keep whoring myself. We'll see who gets to live a good life, Mo Weiyu!"

He shouted until even Mo Ran's silhouette had disappeared. Only then did he drop into a crouch. His hands came up to cover his face as he choked back his sobs. "How come you get to do things over? How come you get to have someone who treats you well…even someone as rotten as you…how come…"

Chapter 113:
Shizun, Imprisoned

THE LARGEST COURTYARD on the east side was as Rong Jiu described. There were three floors in all, room after room of cells. It was the grandest sector of the vast estate, but also the most unkempt. An old tree hung low by the entrance to the courtyard, and on it perched countless dead crows. Each held an eyeball in its beak that spun madly, surveying the surroundings for anything out of the ordinary.

Two small groups of patrolling ghost soldiers stomped back and forth, guarding the “tributes” that were to be offered to the Fourth Ghost King. Concealed behind a corner, Mo Ran observed the ghosts’ patrol routes as he sized up the blind spots around the building. All the lights were lit in those small, box-like rooms. From time to time, he could hear the ghosts inside weeping or sighing. The sounds mingled and overlapped in the night like an eerie elegy echoing from the ancient past. It was enough to make one’s hair stand on end.

There were upward of three hundred rooms, and the patrol passed by every ten minutes. There was no way he was going to be able to so easily find Chu Wanning in ten minutes—and on top of that, every floor had a guard by the stair armed with a soul-shattering whip and wearing an emergency signal whistle around their neck.

Mo Ran was fretting anxiously when he spotted a lone ghost approaching from a distance. He was dressed in the same uniform as the guards, with a red-on-black token hung at his waist. Mo Ran scooted farther into the shadows and watched as this man passed right in front of him, coming to a stop at the foot of the stair.

The ghost exchanged nods with the guard there. The night was very still, and from his hiding spot, Mo Ran could hear every word of their conversation.

"Qi-ge, you here to relieve Lao-San?"

"Mhm. You're almost off too, right?"

"I'm just waiting for the next guy to take over. I'm off as soon as he gets here."

The newly arrived ghost soldier went up the stairs to begin his shift. The guard on the first floor yawned in boredom and continued to watch his post in the howling wind. Mo Ran was suddenly struck by a risky idea…

In the distance came three sounds: *whack slam thud*. The crows on the branch screeched, and the guard at the entrance snapped to alertness. He peered around and spied, through the thin layer of fog, the hazy silhouette of someone steadily approaching. As the figure drew close, he could see that it was an unfamiliar young man. The guard grew warier. "Who are you?"

"I'm here to relieve you."

Red clouds drifted past overhead, and the bright moon above peeked out to illuminate the new guard's face—and what a handsome young ghost soldier he was. His features were straight and even, charming and naturally expressive.

This "ghost" who had come to change shifts was none other than Mo Ran. He was decked out in a ghost soldier's armored uniform that he had acquired from who knows where, complete with a black-red token swinging at his waist and an emergency whistle that dangled by his chest, reflecting a cold, silvery light.

"I've never seen you before." There was a challenge in the guard's voice.

“I’m new.”

The guard stuck out his hand, unconvinced. “Token?”

Mo Ran untied the token at his waist and handed it over. His expression was even and unperturbed, but inside, his nerves were stretched taut. Luckily, even after looking the token over several times, front and back, the guard found nothing strange. He didn’t feel like pressing the matter, so in the end he clapped Mo Ran on the shoulder and said, “Well then, we’ll be counting on you for the rest of the night. I’m off.”

“Have a safe trip home, Qianbei.”

The ghost cackled a bit, well pleased at this respectful address, and waved his hand. “Good lad. I’ll see you around.”

“Ah… Qianbei, a moment please!”

“What is it?” The guard turned to look over his shoulder.

Mo Ran grinned and, very casually, asked, “Any tributes in this batch have the surname Chu?”

The guard was cautious. “Why do you ask?”

“Just asking around for Sir Chu of Tailwind Hall,” Mo Ran said. “Apparently a distant relative of his came down here recently, but Tailwind Hall couldn’t find him. So he was wondering if he might be here.”

As expected, Chu Xun’s name carried some weight around here. The guard hesitated a beat, then pointed toward the second floor. “There are three people named Chu in the innermost rooms up there. You can go take a look.”

Mo Ran smiled brightly. “Many thanks for the tip, Qianbei.”

“You’re welcome.” Qianbei was dumb as fuck. “Matter of course.”

With that settled, the guard wandered off leisurely, humming a

light little tune. He strolled right past the corner without noticing his real comrade, the one who was meant to relieve him, trussed up with a binding spell and tossed in a ditch. The poor ghost had been stripped of his armor and left in only his thin inner garments. Glare as he might, he was gagged so well and so thoroughly that he couldn't make a sound and lay there fuming uselessly.

Mo Ran didn't trust Rong Jiu not to pull something. The unpicked tributes were kept together in the side palace. Although there was only a barrier outside and no guard, there might still be patrols. Considering how much Rong Jiu hated him, he would definitely rat on Mo Ran if a patrol should pass by. There was no time to lose; he had to move fast.

Mo Ran stood and waited for a patrol unit to pass him. The second they were out of sight, he turned and bounded up to the second floor. The guard at the top of the stairs blocked Mo Ran with his pike. "Halt. State your business."

"It's my first day as a guard here, on the first floor."

The guard furrowed his brow. "Then go guard the first floor. What're you doing up here?"

Mo Ran tried dropping Chu Xun's name again, but this guard wasn't buying it. "So what if it's for Sir Chu of Tailwind Hall?" he snapped, stern. "Once a soul's in this here palace, they're the property of the fourth king. If he wants to rescue his relative, he can take it up with the fourth king himself. Keep me out of it!"

Mo Ran grumbled internally—this guy seemed a bit sharper than the one downstairs. He put on a bold front and tried again. "It's not like I'm gonna take him *today*, but at least let me have a look and see if I've got the right person."

"That's easy. Give me the name and I'll look it up. No need for you to go yourself."

Mo Ran was indescribably vexed. He tamped down his anger and said, “Chu Wanning. His name is Chu Wanning.”

The soldier had lifted the roster to check, but the second he heard this name, he set it back down.

Mo Ran was immediately worried. “What is it? What’s the problem?”

“What’s the problem?” The guard echoed with a sneer. “You sure don’t know your place, new guy. The fourth king came by earlier today to see the beauties, and he’s sweet on this Chu-xianjun. He’s only still here because his seven days aren’t up, so his three souls aren’t united, and he can’t yet be taken to the fourth level of hell. Otherwise, he would’ve been given to the ghost king this very night. And you want him? What do you *think* the problem is?”

Mo Ran’s face had gone blue before the guard was halfway through. He stared at him for a long moment. “The Fourth Ghost King fancies him?”

“So?”

“…Nothing. Never mind then, sorry to bother you.” Mo Ran turned and took two sullen steps down the stairs. Then Jiangui formed in his hand, and before the guard could so much as blink, Mo Ran had spun around and wrapped it tightly around the guard’s neck with a flash of piercing scarlet. Holy weapons could maim ghosts and gods alike. That guard’s last impressions were of scarlet willow leaves flying past and the newcomer exclaiming angrily, “What makes you think I wouldn’t fight the ghost king for him!” before he lost consciousness and crumpled to the floor.

Mo Ran raised his hands and cast a spell to bind the guard and seal his lips, then kicked him aside. He sped toward the end of the hall. The three rooms down here all held souls with the surname Chu.

Although Mo Ran wasn't sure how, he seemed to know in his heart which way to go—so much so that, before he'd even stopped to wonder at this peculiar feeling, his hand had already pushed open the door. He stood looking into the second room, slightly out of breath from running so fast.

He panted. A strand of inky black hair fell across his eyes, but he paid it no mind, his eyes fixed on the interior of the room. It was just as Rong Jiu had said: a small room the size of an animal's cage, with drab, ashy walls the color of death. But the person inside seemed so very warm, like a blazing flame in that cold expanse of white.

Not every tribute was bound, or at least Chu Wanning wasn't. Perhaps, since the fourth king had already set his sights on this one, the guards didn't dare offend him. There was even a snow-white animal pelt on the floor, thick and soft as a layer of fresh snow in deepest winter. Chu Wanning lay asleep on this fur rug. He was the kind of person who, though he appeared resolute and undaunted, was in truth ever a little uneasy deep down. This manifested most clearly in sleep—he always slept curled up, shrinking into himself to make himself smaller. As if he was trying to keep warm, but also as if he was afraid to take up too much space. Seen like this, he looked frail and a little pitiful.

This soul wasn't like his human soul. His handsome face was clean of bloodstains, and the clothes he wore were different too. He was clad in vibrant red silks the color of sunset. They were loose-fitting and broad-sleeved, and richly patterned with images of coiling dragons and soaring phoenixes, of dancing golden butterflies.

Mo Ran stumbled forward and dropped to his knees beside Chu Wanning. He reached out with trembling hands to caress his face.

"Wanning…"

The syllables that slipped out weren't *Shizun*, but the name by

which Mo Ran had called him in those final days of his past life. Those twisted days of hatred and entanglement, carved into his very soul. Mo Ran lifted Chu Wanning into his arms, but it took some time for the drowsy man to wake.

When Chu Wanning's eyes fluttered open, he found himself lying in Mo Ran's embrace. The look of concern on the young man's face, those features that had yet to fully mature, was an expression the likes of which he'd never seen. He furrowed his brow and thought that perhaps this was some kind of dream. Thus, after a moment, he sighed and closed his eyes once more.

"Shizun!" someone called by his ear. It wasn't *Wanning* this time. "Shizun! Shizun!"

Chu Wanning's phoenix eyes flew open. This time, although his expression remained unchanged, he was betrayed by the minute trembling of his fingertips.

Mo Ran took hold of his hand and pressed its palm to his own face, laughing and crying until his handsome features were a sorry mess. "Shizun," he choked back a sob as he gazed at him, unblinking, then repeated the word over and over like he had forgotten how to say anything else. "Shizun…"

Chu Wanning finally returned to his senses to find himself clutched tightly in Mo Ran's arms. Feeling unconsciously that this was improper, he struggled free and sat up to nail Mo Ran with a glare. Long moments passed as he stared at Mo Ran, not saying a single word.

Then, he flew into a rage.

Before Mo Ran could react, Chu Wanning had jerked his hand away and struck him across the face with a backhanded slap. "You idiot!" He scowled furiously. "How did you die too?!"

Mo Ran opened his mouth to explain, when he saw, in the haziness of the moonlight, that beneath all his anger, the eyes overshadowed by Chu Wanning's long lashes were sorrowful. They seemed to suppress myriad emotions, as if he didn't want to believe the evidence of his eyes, and also as if he were holding back tears that would well up at the slightest touch. When he'd finished cursing, he bit down hard on his lower lip, using all his will to repress the shameful, humiliating tightness in his throat.

There were those who would make a great show of the tiniest cut and ensure everyone knew they'd been injured. And then there were those who were too proud to say anything; who would rather swallow their grievance and suffering—even if it tore their throats bloody—than speak a word of it. He'd never said, so Mo Ran had never known. But now that he did, his heart ached terribly. He wanted to hold Chu Wanning, but Chu Wanning pushed him away. His voice was hoarse as he said, "Get the hell out."

Chu Wanning turned his face away, a thousand layers of heartbreak hidden under that veneer of brittle coldness. "You've got some nerve, coming to see me after dying so young."

"Shizun…"

"Out." Chu Wanning's face turned away even further. "You're no disciple of mine. I don't take anyone so useless as to end up dead in his prime."

Dead in his prime…

Mo Ran had originally been dejected, but after being reprimanded so seriously like this, he felt warmth flood his heart like trickling spring water. He raised a hand and clapped his palm to his forehead before dragging it down to cover his eyes. Then, unable to help himself, he began to laugh, bitter and sweet and sour all mixed together.

The light sound of his laughter made Chu Wanning angrier still. He whipped his head around to chide, “What’re you laughing about, you —” In a fit of rage, he drew his arm back slap Mo Ran again, but Mo Ran swiftly caught his hand.

The young man’s gentle eyes blinked, slow. Without a word, he solemnly brought Chu Wanning’s hand to press against his own chest.

Chapter 114:
Shizun, Say You Will

T*HUMP, THUMP, THUMP.* A slow, steady heartbeat.

Chu Wanning blinked. Surprise, joy, awkwardness, and embarrassment all flitted through his eyes in the space of an instant. But this was the Yuheng Elder after all: calm and cool as ever, singularly adept at schooling his features into unruffled composure, sweeping those extraneous emotions under the rug in a trice as if the one who'd admonished Mo Ran in despair just now had been someone else entirely.

"What're you doing down here if you're not dead?" Chu Wanning regretted the words as soon as they'd left his mouth. It was obvious that Mo Ran had come to save him. But Chu Wanning was afraid that, if Mo Ran really were to say that, his heart might beat right out of his chest. He was so nervous he completely forgot he was already dead and had no heart to speak of.

But Mo Ran gazed at him without saying any such thing. He likely knew Chu Wanning would be embarrassed if he were to say, *I came here for you.* Mo Ran thought a bit, then pressed his lips together and lowered his lashes. "Shizun," he asked gently, "can you guess why I'm here?"

A long pause. "You came looking for trouble."

"Since when did Shizun change his name to 'Trouble'?" Mo Ran grinned. "Should've told me."

Chu Wanning jerked his hand back, as if stung by this new gentleness. He snapped in flustered anger, "What nonsense! How impudent."

Mo Ran had learned a secret: Chu Wanning's anger was a mask. This man was so awkward he donned that menacing, garish mask and hid all his gentleness, happiness, joy, embarrassment, and sadness underneath. What a dummy.

Chu Wanning was a dummy. To wear such a mask his entire life—wasn't it exhausting? Mo Ran was a dummy too. It had taken him two whole lifetimes to figure it out.

After that, the mood was a bit lighter. And now that Mo Ran had located all four of Chu Wanning's souls, rebirth was finally within reach. Mo Ran was in high spirits. He grabbed Chu Wanning's hand again, clutching it as he rambled on and on. Mo Ran told him why he'd come down to the underworld, and about Master Huaizui. When he reached certain parts, he had to stop and wait for the tightness in his throat to subside before forging ahead with red-rimmed eyes. And in all his explanations, the words that appeared most were "I'm sorry."

Chu Wanning didn't know what to say.

He showed kindness to others, but he didn't do it to reap any benefit. If anything, he was afraid they'd feel troubled to receive his goodwill, or indebted to him. The honest truth was that he feared he'd offer up his warm, beating heart to someone, only for them to casually set it aside to cool. Thus, despite being open and straightforward in all other respects, he would always hide his kind deeds.

He had worn a mask his whole life. But one day, the person he liked suddenly reached out and plucked that vividly painted anger right off his face, leaving him like a crab without its shell. He stood dazed, at a complete loss for what to do.

As Chu Wanning stared vacantly, Mo Ran knelt before him, one hand still grasping Chu Wanning's, as if afraid he might disappear. For a split second, ridiculous, shameful thoughts raced through Chu

Wanning's mind. This disciple of his had always been brazen and audacious, with no regard for common sense. For Mo Ran to suddenly take his hand and treat him thusly, he couldn't help thinking the other was up to something. Chu Wanning was startled by his own thoughts, and his face became gloomier still. Unsure what kind of expression he ought to wear, he could do nothing but fall back on the cool detachment that was his habit. But Mo Ran wasn't up to anything at all. He continued to hold his hand, like he was holding a treasure once lost, now regained. This person whom he had tossed aside like worthless junk in his past life.

"Shizun." Having set down that great burden of hatred, Mo Ran knelt before him now—earnest, respectful, full of warmth. "Before, I was in the wrong. From now on, I'll go left if you say left, right if you say right; all I want is for you to be happy." Perhaps he was feeling too many emotions at once; his eyes sparkled with tears as he smiled up at him. "So come back with me, okay?"

Chu Wanning said nothing; his face was calm as still water, but his heart blazed like a beacon of fire.

"Shizun." Mo Ran's voice was gentle and soft, with a touch of lingering youthfulness. When Mo Ran hated someone, it was with unadulterated vehemence. But if he cherished someone, it was with his whole heart. He had always been this way, doing nothing by halves.

"Come back with me. Say you will, okay?"

Chu Wanning remained unresponsive. He stared absently at Mo Ran as if lost in thought.

Mo Ran was worried Chu Wanning might still be cross, so he forced himself to smile through the dejection that settled over him, tried his best to keep it together lest he make his shizun uncomfortable. He swung their joined hands a little and wheedled, "Shizun can just nod."

No response.

Then, afraid he might not nod either, Mo Ran considered for a moment and added, “I’ll count to three, okay?”

Still nothing.

“If Shizun doesn’t say anything, I’ll take it as a yes, ’kay?” Mo Ran said, nervous but still gentle. He paused, then slowly counted off: “One, two, three.”

But Chu Wanning was like a person exposed to the freezing cold for too long. Suddenly plunged into warm water, he felt not warmth, but pain. He had never been wanted before, so he hadn’t even known that to be frozen was an agony. But now that there was someone who treasured him, who surrounded him with warmth, it was as though he finally had a right to feel pain. Every inch of his body was on fire, every inch of his skin cracked. Only now did he feel the hurt.

The tips of his fingers quivered minutely in Mo Ran’s palms, which were now clammy with sweat.

The longer Chu Wanning stood silent, the more anxious Mo Ran grew. He was afraid Chu Wanning had lost heart and didn’t want to return to the living world. But neither did he dare move, afraid that Chu Wanning would vanish and leave him behind if he so much as twitched. Mo Ran smiled warmly and tried again. “I counted too fast; you probably weren’t ready yet. I’ll count again: one, two, three.”

No response.

Mo Ran’s throat worked. He was trembling now, but he forced himself to smile and smile, saying—practically begging—“Shizun, did you hear me?”

Some focus finally seemed to come into Chu Wanning’s phoenix eyes, but they were still distant, fixed on Mo Ran’s face with an unreadable expression.

“I’ll count again—I’ll go slower this time, in case it’s hard to hear,” Mo Ran said. “One, two, three.”

Nothing.

“I’m going to count one last time… One, two, three.”

“This time’s really the last. One, two, three…”

Chu Wanning stared, blank-faced, at that young man kneeling at his feet counting *one-two-three, one-two-three,* again and again like a dummy, as if repeating it could reverse time’s flow, could coax a withered tree to bloom, could bring back the dead. The disciple before him counted with all he had, clumsy, stubborn, like he was counting his own sins, counting all the ways his shizun had been good to him. He counted until his voice shook and his smile was one of panic.

“Shizun.” Mo Ran looked up. The rims of his eyes were red. But he had already wronged Chu Wanning so greatly, all the way to this point. Mo Ran didn’t want to cry where he could see and hear. He didn’t want to cause his shizun any more grief. So he swallowed his tears and smiled, keeping his tone light and easy, as if bargaining. “I’ll count again. Pay attention to me, won’t you?”

Chu Wanning felt like his heart was being stabbed by this pleading. He tried to pull his hand from Mo Ran’s grip, as if it frightened him. But this time, Mo Ran held on tight and refused to let go. With a dog-like persistence, the young man gazed up at him steadily, unblinkingly. He said, “One, two…”

Just then, the sound of rapid footsteps echoed from the outside, accompanied by yelling and cursing. Chu Wanning’s head snapped up. He saw a sea of lights swarming in the distance as a vast army of ghost soldiers closed in, headed straight for their location.

Rong Jiu had found a chance to snitch on them, after all.

“There! Upstairs! Upstairs!”

“Seize the thief!”

“Who does he think he is?”

Everywhere he looked was tumultuous, frenzied chaos, the flickering shadows of ghosts and torches rolling in like a tide to devour them, obliterate them, plunge them into the Infinite Hells for the rest of eternity.

But Mo Ran didn’t even turn around. In that moment, holding Chu Wanning’s hand, he felt at peace. Chu Wanning was not his lover, but he was his beloved person, someone he respected above all others, someone who loved him and treated him well. Gazing at him, Mo Ran felt a calmness settle over his heart.

“Have you lost your mind?!” Chu Wanning hissed. “What’re you doing still on the floor!” He turned his hand to grip Mo Ran’s and pulled him up as he spoke. His eyes were bright in the light of those innumerable torches, looking just as they had in life. Chu Wanning scowled and snapped, “Let’s go already!”

Mo Ran seemed surprised. “You’re coming?”

Now Chu Wanning was getting really mad. “Who else?!”

Trembling, Mo Ran closed his eyes. Then he opened them again and smiled. It was a brilliant smile, tears pooling in his eyes like lovely, dew-laden blossoms. He finally, finally let out the breath he’d been holding and clasped their hands tightly together. Fingers interlocked. He pressed his forehead to Chu Wanning’s and whispered quietly, earnestly, “Three.”

“What do you mean *three*?! Hurry up!”

The sea of ghosts outside was drawing closer. Mo Ran at last turned to look and let out a somewhat panicked sound when he saw the horde closing in. “Shizun, put up a barrier to hold them off for a minute while I get you into the soul-calling lantern!”

“I can’t.”

“Wha?!” Mo Ran was dumbfounded.

Chu Wanning’s customary cool and collected expression was a little flustered. He quickly covered his embarrassment with irritation: “Do you really think I’d be trapped in this stupid little cage if I still had my powers?!”

Mo Ran had no words. All righty then—so the thing missing from this soul was cultivation.

He had to recite the spell without interruption in order to draw a soul into the lantern. It wouldn’t take long, but it would definitely take longer than they had. Mo Ran could only grab Chu Wanning and make a run for it.

Chu Wanning might have lost his cultivation, but he still had his martial skills. He easily kept pace with Mo Ran. The two beat a hasty retreat, pursued by a torrential stream of ghost soldiers. When they’d made it as far as the door of the main hall, Chu Wanning asked, “Where are we going?”

“Dunno.”

Chu Wanning was speechless.

But Mo Ran pointed up at the towering palace walls, undiscouraged. “Let’s go up there and scope it out.”

Fortunately, Chu Wanning had a solid foundation in qinggong and had no problem vaulting up walls even without the aid of his cultivation. He alighted gracefully on the eaves, then looked down to see the swarm of angry ghosts roaring closer. “Summon Jiangui!”

Mo Ran did as he was told. A strand of radiant scarlet appeared with a swipe of his palms and sprang forth like a hissing snake, its willow leaves vibrant and rustling as the holy weapon settled into a coil

by his feet.

"Channel your spiritual energy past Wuli, through Quchi, and converge on Shangyang,[22] then whip downward."

Mo Ran raised his arm to strike.

Chu Wanning suddenly remembered something and added, "Not too much spiritual energy."

Mo Ran faltered, but it was too late to pull back. The instant he flung the whip out, explosive fire shot from the hissing snake with a *boom*, like a fire-spitting dragon roaring its fury as it cut through the torrential dead. The raging inferno blazed through the entire corridor, the flames moving the stars themselves, smoke rising beyond the clouds. The scores of soldiers at the vanguard were scorched to ash in a heartbeat. Not even the walls and trees were spared.

Chu Wanning and Mo Ran gazed at the wreckage in silence for a long moment.

"Didn't I say not to use too much spiritual energy?!" Chu Wanning scolded with a frown.

"By the time you said it I was already…" He suddenly remembered he'd resolved to be respectful and not talk back to his shizun. Mo Ran shut his mouth on his protests and said instead, a bit disgruntled, "Shizun is right to scold me."

"Forget it." Chu Wanning flicked his sleeve. "I did say it a little late."

Mo Ran was taken aback—so all it took for his shizun to cave was for Mo Ran to take the blame himself? He blinked and couldn't help but burst into laughter.

Chu Wanning glared at him. "What's so funny? Get a move on."

Chapter 115:
Shizun Is Already Married

"YEP, LET'S GO, LET'S GO," Mo Ran responded. A look of worry came over his face as something occurred to him. "Shizun, I killed so many ghost soldiers just now. The underworld's probably not gonna let us off easy."

"It's fine," Chu Wanning said. "That technique doesn't scatter the opponent's soul irremediably, it only shatters it. Those soldiers'll piece themselves back together in a day or two."

Mo Ran peered down. Sure enough, specks of souls like glowing fireflies floated about the smoldering, charred remains. But before he could investigate further, he felt Chu Wanning tugging on his hand. "Run."

Another wave of furious soldiers rushed from behind the collapsed walls like a horde of rampaging beasts. Chu Wanning and Mo Ran sped across the tiled rooftops. As they ran, Mo Ran asked, "Shizun, if they don't really die, we won't offend the underworld that much. Why not let me use more spiritual energy and beat them all back?"

"Why don't you try using it again?" Chu Wanning asked sardonically.

Mo Ran was puzzled, but tried it nonetheless. To his surprise, all that issued from his whip this time was a tiny wisp of smoke. Jiangui seemed terribly worn out; it displayed none of that impressive sun-swallowing, mountain-crushing might from a few minutes ago.

"The more spiritual energy you use, the longer it takes to recover," Chu Wanning explained. "So refrain from excess. Understood?"

“Got it.” Mo Ran paused. “Shizun. I just remembered something. Wanna guess what it is?”

“What?”

“I remembered that time at the Peach Blossom Springs, in the illusion, when you taught me how to use the willow vine just like this. You were really little back then.” Mo Ran grinned toothily and held up his hand, palm down. “Didn’t even reach my waist.”

Chu Wanning stumbled.

“Careful!”

“Get lost.” If Chu Wanning were still alive, his ears would’ve been red by now. “Comparing heights with Xia Sini?” he snapped in embarrassed anger. “Why don’t you pick on someone your own size, like me?”

Mo Ran grinned, refusing to take the bait. He *was* taller now, no longer visibly shorter than Chu Wanning as he had been back at Butterfly Town. But he was still only about even with him. He stole a sidelong glance at his shizun and made a mental note to compare their heights in a few more years, once this young body of his was done growing.

While over here, Emperor Taxian-jun was scheming away, over there, Yuheng of the Night Sky was contending with some rather complicated feelings. He’d been fairly sure Mo Ran knew he was Xia Sini by now, but to actually hear him say it aloud was still a humiliating ordeal for Chu Wanning’s thin face.

After all…he had looked up at Mo Ran and called him *shige*.

The more he thought about it, the more mortified and incensed he felt. Chu Wanning ran faster and faster, until Mo Ran had to race to catch up.

Mo Ran had an inkling of what was going through his shizun's head, so he let him run ahead and kept half a pace behind. As they fled from their pursuers with the wind blowing in their face, Mo Ran gazed at the man in front of him. He was just within reach, his red robes fluttering like drifting maple leaves or ember clouds at dusk, scattered with gold-embroidered butterflies that glimmered, nearly alive. Mo Ran was struck with a feeling of bittersweet contentment. In that moment, he was grateful. Grateful that he could still see Chu Wanning, grateful that he could receive his guidance as before. And in a few more years, if everything went smoothly, he could lower his head with a smile and tease, "This disciple has come to compare heights with Shizun. This disciple will stand right here—Shizun can stand on tiptoe if he likes."

His heart felt warm. The heavens were truly kind to him. Not everyone was afforded the chance to make amends after committing wrongs, and not everyone could forgive and let go after being hurt. His shizun was so warm beneath that cold exterior, yet it had taken him so long to see it.

They fended off two more waves of pursuers. The main gate of the palace was now within sight.

Glancing back, Mo Ran saw that the soldiers chasing them had been left in the dust; they couldn't possibly catch up. Mo Ran sighed in relief—but he hadn't even finished exhaling when a sudden clap of thunder boomed in front of them.

A massive sedan chair materialized within a storm of fiery lightning, carried steadily upon the shoulders of eight brawny men who kneeled on the ground. A man reclined languidly on the sedan, his plump frame wrapped in snowy beast furs and his long hair draping loosely down. He had a beauty on each arm; one massaged his shoulders while the other fed him cherries.

He chewed and swallowed the fruit, consuming it rather than just letting it pass through for a taste. This big-bellied man might be a soul, but he had cultivated a corporeal form.

The man licked his lips and grabbed one of the beauties by the jaw. He planted a sloppy kiss on that lovely face before slowly glancing up at Chu Wanning and Mo Ran with a sneer. “Could it be that some hooligan is actually trying to steal this king’s little darling? Well now, this simply *won’t* do.” He looked at Mo Ran lazily. “Quite the bold little cultivator, aren’t we?”

Chu Wanning’s face was so pale as to be nearly blue, and his expression was terribly sour. To have been called “little darling” by this greasy lecher of a ghost right in front of Mo Ran… If he still had his powers, Tianwen would’ve turned this bastard to paste by now.

Mo Ran’s expression wasn’t much better. But he was painfully aware that, at his current level of cultivation, he couldn’t protect Chu Wanning while also facing off against a ghost king.

Thus he could only try his hand at diplomacy. He stepped forward and cupped a hand over his fist respectfully. “My lord, sincere apologies for the damage to your palace, but I will be taking this person.”

“Oho, and that’s up to you now, is it?” The Fourth Ghost King smirked. “What do you think he’s wearing there? I’ll tell you: it’s a ghost marriage gown. In other words, the ceremonial robes of the underworld. Now that he’s been clothed in my robes, he belongs to me. He won’t be able to set so much as a foot outside the gates of this palace. You don’t have to take my word for it. Go on and give it a try.” He paused, then added, “If you do bring him out by force, the spiritual energy within those robes will shatter your souls at the gate. Don’t say I didn’t warn you.”

Now Mo Ran understood why Chu Wanning hadn’t been restrained

despite Rong Jiu's assertion that everyone in the main palace was tied up. So these red robes on him… Mo Ran's hands clenched into fists. "I'll make it up to you for taking him, of course. Whatever my lord desires, I'll do my utmost to provide."

"This king wants only beauties—not the gentle, obedient kind; those have become rather tedious of late. This king likes exactly the type standing there next to you, icy and standoffish. They've got more flavor that way."

Mo Ran and Chu Wanning both fell silent, both completely speechless.

Intrigued by the look on their faces, the fourth king sat up unhurriedly and said, "To be honest, this is the first time in all my years in the underworld that someone's busted into my palace to wreak havoc like this. I'm rather curious—just who are you to him?"

"He's my shizun," Mo Ran answered.

"Oh, is that all?" The ghost king spread his hands and shrugged, grinning in amusement. "And here I thought there was some kind of life-or-death bond."

After a long moment, Mo Ran tried again. "What's the point in keeping him against his will if he doesn't like you?"

The ghost king gave a lazy wave of his hand. "Foolish child, whether he likes me or not is irrelevant. It's his body this king desires, not his heart."

Mo Ran had no reply to that.

"And besides," the ghost king continued with a sneer, "so what if he doesn't like me? It's not like he likes *you*. Now if you two were already wedded, that'd be a different story. This king fancies beauties, but I have no interest in secondhand goods. What a pity he's only your shizun."

Mo Ran was at first stunned. Then, he suddenly smiled. “My lord means it?”

“This king is the master of the fourth level of hell. Why should I waste my breath lying to a no-name little ghost like you?”

“Then let me ask this: if my shizun was indeed already married, then would the ceremonial robes have any effect?”

“Of course not. This king has never cared to play with other people’s husbands and wives.” The Fourth Ghost King furrowed his brow. “Why do you ask? *Is* your shizun already married?”

Chu Wanning cared about maintaining face. “No.”

Mo Ran did not. “Yup.”

The Fourth Ghost King eyed them silently.

Before Chu Wanning could say another word, Mo Ran had grabbed his hand and begun pulling him toward the gate. He looked over his shoulder at the Fourth Ghost King as he walked. “Don’t mind him, my lord, Shizun’s always had a terrible memory. Anyway, like you said, the ceremonial robes won’t do anything if he’s already married, so let’s not waste time chatting; I’ll just go ahead and take him outside. If we walk out without incident, then please let us go. If I lied, then I’ll get what’s coming to me.”

“Mo Ran, have you gone mad?” Chu Wanning protested. “That was just an act back at Butterfly Town, it doesn’t count—”

“Sure it counts,” Mo Ran said confidently, without the slightest hint of doubt. “We drank the wine and did the bows, with ancestors above and the earth below. Why wouldn’t it count?”

“Mo Ran—!”

After thousands of dull and monotonous years in the underworld, the ghost king was tickled to witness to such a quarrel. He settled into

his chair and propped his cheek in one hand to watch with interest, then patted the thigh of the beauty beside him so she might feed him more candied fruit. “Sure thing, go ahead,” he said as he chewed. “If you make it out in one piece, I won’t keep you. If you die, that’s on you.”

“Many thanks,” said Mo Ran.

The barrier over the main gate of the palace flickered with a faint purple light. It was clearly meant to keep the souls inside. The closer Chu Wanning got to that barrier, the more unwilling he grew. There was no way some slapdash ghost marriage like that would count…

But just then, Mo Ran leaned in close and said in a quiet voice, “Don’t worry, Shizun, our marriage is definitely valid.”

“Valid how?!”

“Listen to me just this once. I know what I’m doing here.” He laced their fingers together and squeezed, though his own palm was slick with sweat. “And even if luck’s not on our side, I’ll be right here with Shizun.”

Chu Wanning flinched. He opened his phoenix eyes wide, staring at Mo Ran in astonishment, as though seeing him for the first time. Mo Ran beamed brightly back at him, his dimples deep and warm. “I owe Shizun so much already. This time around, I won’t abandon Shizun.”

Chu Wanning was silent for a long interval. He muttered softly, “Why do all that?”

“Then what about Shizun? Why did you do all that?”

Chu Wanning lowered his lashes. Then he let out a quiet sigh and stopped fighting. The two stood hand in hand before the crackling purple barrier as a mass of ghosts gathered behind them to watch the show.

“Ready?”

“Ready.”

Neither could tell who tightened their grip first, squeezing so firmly, freezing cold over scalding warmth, clammy wrapped around dry, pale white against skin the color of wheat.

The blazing inferno and roaring thunder of the barrier surged before them. It was like an enormous flood, a gigantic waterfall. They stepped in at practically the same time, and the tide of fiery lightning surged toward them. It crashed down with a might that could swallow mountains and rend rivers, threatening to tear apart this pair so bold as to step outside the gate of life and death. In the very next instant it would rip them to shreds, burn them to ash.

This tremendous current flared with a light so blinding it was nearly white. It was a split second away from striking them. Mo Ran had made up his mind to respect and love his shizun, to never again disobey him, much less sully him with any untoward thoughts. But in that moment, in that uncertain breath between life and death, he whipped his head around, wanting to take one last look at Chu Wanning’s face.

Only to see, amidst the deluge of sparks that rained down around them, Chu Wanning’s gaze on him as well. Those phoenix eyes had at times been fierce, resolute, pained, resentful, enduring…but in this instant, they held a tranquility before the end.

And—he wasn’t sure if he was imagining it—a deep affection.

Mo Ran had never seen such a look in Chu Wanning’s eyes before. There was a loud rumbling in his head like countless cities collapsing, and his chest was flooded with burning affection, bursting up from a thick layer of sooty black earth. He had no time to contemplate what kind of feeling this might be, overwhelmed as he was by the searing heat in his heart and the boiling of his blood.

Between the flashes of lightning and crashing of thunder, he

reached out without thinking and pulled Chu Wanning into a tight embrace. Frenzied heartbeats against quivering soul. Chest to chest.

Truth be told, before Mo Ran had come down to the underworld, the thought of dying together with Chu Wanning had never once crossed his mind. He had always thought the one he loved was Shi Mei, so if he were to die together with someone, it would be with Shi Mei. But when truly faced with the prospect of death, he had instinctively pulled Chu Wanning into his arms, as if trying to merge Chu Wanning's flesh into his own, hide his soul within his own.

Chu Wanning. I'm with you. I…

"Aiya, who'd've thought! You two really *are* star-crossed lovers." An amused voice drifted indolently over. "Can it be that this king actually got the wrong ghost? This xianjun really is married?"

Mo Ran's eyes snapped open. While he wasn't looking, the lightning and thunder that had been hellbent on tearing them to pieces moments ago had transformed into countless dandelions, dancing lightly all around them like a flurry of snowflakes.

The Fourth Ghost King stood with a smile and clapped, slow and leisurely, from his sedan near the palace gate. "It's been hundreds of humdrum years. That was a hell of a show."

Mo Ran was still in a stupor. He looked dazedly toward the Fourth Ghost King, then turned to look at the person in his arms. He was hit with a sudden realization as to the impropriety of holding his shizun like this, and hurriedly withdrew his hands. Chu Wanning also seemed to jolt back to reality and turned his face away, his expression unreadable as he straightened his robes in stiff silence.

Mo Ran lifted his head toward the Fourth Ghost King. "See, my lord?" he asked, attempting to ease the awkwardness. "I didn't lie, did I?"

“You most certainly did not.” The Fourth Ghost King shook his head, and the corners of his lips crooked up in an almost-smile. “It’s nothing but monotony here day after day; it’s been many years since I’ve been so entertained. Very well, I’ll let you two go, if only as thanks for the spectacle. This king has no shortage of beauties. I won’t miss an already-married soul.”

Mo Ran was delighted. He thought to himself that this Fourth Ghost King was much more magnanimous than that Ninth Ghost King that Chu Xun had encountered. Sure, he was a perv, but at least he kept his word and had something of a lordly air about him. He turned to leave with Chu Wanning in tow.

Just then, the clouds overhead scattered, and the light of the moon shone down on Mo Ran, casting a dark and silent shadow at his feet.

The Fourth Ghost King didn’t react right away. He remained grinning, quite pleased with the rare diversion to which he’d been treated. He turned and gestured for the beauty at his side to feed him a grape. The beauty peeled the fruit of its dark purple skin and held the succulent, translucent flesh to the Fourth Ghost King’s lips. He was about to open his mouth when he finally realized that something was off, and his head whipped back around. “Hold it!” he roared.

He stared at the shadow. His gaze traveled up slowly, inch by inch, until it was fixed on Mo Ran’s face. After a long moment, he said, “Why don’t you take a look at what’s on the ground.”

Looking down, Mo Ran discovered to his horror that a blurry shadow clung to his feet.

The Fourth Ghost King’s lax, whimsical expression evaporated at once, and his long and narrow eyes narrowed further, flickering with the avidity of a vulture ready to swoop on its prey. “And how exactly did a living person like yourself manage to worm your way into hell?”

Chapter 116:
Shizun Meets Rong Jiu

As soon as Chu Wanning spied light gathering in the ghost king's hand, he shoved Mo Ran hard and yelled, "Run!"

There was no need to tell him again. Mo Ran grabbed Chu Wanning's arm, and the two fled toward the palace gates, leaping and bounding through the air. "Dammit, Master Huaizui's spell is too careless!" Mo Ran cursed as they ran. "How could he leave me with a shadow—of course people are gonna see through me!"

For some reason, even though his disciple was maligning his own master right in front of him, Chu Wanning showed no reaction. He only threw Mo Ran a glance, as if there was something he wanted to say, but in the end, no words left his lips.

"Trying to escape?" The Fourth Ghost King snorted. "As if I'd let you off that easy."

Chu Wanning and Mo Ran were experts at qinggong. When they saw the palace gates about to close completely, they vaulted off the wall and made to leap over. But in that same moment, the Fourth Ghost King summoned lightning into his palm. With a swing of his hand, thunder roared, and lightning cracked down to strike the palace gates. In the blink of an eye, the palace walls that had been only ten feet high shot up into the sky, extending so far above they looked like they were about to meet the heavens. The palace gates themselves continued to close rapidly—they were blocked in on all sides.

Mo Ran swore under his breath and dragged Chu Wanning after him as they veered in another direction. If they couldn't exit through the

palace gates, they'd go to ground for now. The main thing was to avoid capture by the Fourth Ghost King.

It was this move that saved them. Every king of the ghost realm had their own strengths and their own shortcomings. While the Fourth Ghost King was a powerful spellcaster, millennia of debauchery and indulgence had left his physical condition far inferior to the others. Never mind running a mile—a mere fifty steps would leave him gasping for breath. The Fourth Ghost King had lazed about for thousands of years, holding fast to the principle of never standing if he could sit, and never sitting if he could lie down. After so long, he'd long let himself go to the point that his qinggong was trash.

His outrage grew as he watched Chu Wanning and Mo Ran disappear into the distance. Unfortunately for him, the Fourth Ghost King's penchant for sweeping up beauties from the other kings' domains meant his relationship with his eight counterparts was rather fraught. Even in a situation like this, he was reluctant to go to the other kings for help capturing the fugitives.

"So you can run fast, so what! This king may be generously proportioned, but there's still no escaping my grasp!" The Fourth Ghost King rubbed his paunch, angry and aggrieved. He turned and saw the eight staunch men who had carried him on their shoulders standing there like statues and became even more displeased. "What are you all standing around for? This king's legs are precious, not meant to give chase—what's stopping *you*?"

The guards exchanged a look. It was said that this Fourth Ghost King had once been a slender, handsome man. But because he'd been deprived of mortal pleasures for too long, no sooner had he cultivated his flesh body than he ruined it with overindulgence in food and drink. He ate while sitting, ate while walking, ate while reclining, ate while squatting. Even at hell's busiest times, when he had to rush out appeals

and hardly had time to write, he still required attendants at his left and right, not to flatten papers or grind ink, but to slice fresh fruit and feed him pastries.

Just like that, a fine and peerless beauty forcibly fed himself into a porker. Although his foundation was excellent and his size wouldn't get too out of hand no matter how much he ate, his appearance had nevertheless changed. After that, the Fourth Ghost King had ordered that all the second palace's mirrors be thrown out, and he abhorred the words "fat" and "obese." Rumor had it that there had once been a pretty attendant who had sung for him, but the first lines of the lyrics had been, "O moon, moon in the sky, round and full, round and…"

Before the last word had left her lips, the Fourth Ghost King had already sent her flying with a kick to the chest. "Round?!" he bellowed. "How dare you call this king fat! Did you think you were being clever?! The *audacity*!"

Which was why, even though these ghost men were strong and hardy, they didn't dare go after Chu Wanning and Mo Ran. Each of them bowed low and let the Fourth Ghost King complain and vent. In the end one, more clever than the rest, spoke up: "My king is so nimble; how could we possibly catch up to people my king can't chase down?"

Only then did the Fourth Ghost King huff out a breath and give up on pursuit altogether. He turned to his subordinates. "Mn, that's true… It's good that you all are self-aware. Very well, leave it. You may pass on this king's command: all the doors of the second palace are to be shut, and the palace walls covered in sealing spells. Not a single fly shall escape."

He clicked his tongue, then spat out the grape seed he'd been holding in his mouth. "I'd like to see how far those two think they can get," he muttered darkly.

Mo Ran and Chu Wanning were both agile, and the interior of the palace was full of twists and turns. It didn't take long for them to ditch the ghosts on their tail. The two hid in a dark and narrow little alley. Chu Wanning was a ghost; no matter how far they ran, he wouldn't tire. Mo Ran, however, was of mortal flesh, and he leaned against the wall, panting.

Chu Wanning peered around the corner. "He's completely sealed the palace," he observed somberly.

Mo Ran was still catching his breath and merely waved his hand. "It's fine, Shizun. Come into the soul-calling lantern—then we can return directly to the mortal realm. There's no way he can stop us."

Chu Wanning gave a small nod. For some reason, worry still colored his brows. Mo Ran didn't notice. He took out the soul-calling lantern and silently recited the spell. The golden light flickered a few times—then went winked out. Chu Wanning's earth soul yet stood before him, quite unmoved.

"What's going on?" Mo Ran was shocked. "Why isn't it working?"

The line between Chu Wanning's brows furrowed deeper, and he sighed. "I thought so. The deliverance spell won't work here. We probably have to leave the palace before we can use that spell to return to the mortal realm."

Upon hearing this, Mo Ran bit his lip and a stubborn look came into his eyes. After a moment he said, voice hoarse, "I'll get you out of here no matter what."

Chu Wanning gave him a look. "We'll need to hurry. The palace complex is massive, so it should be difficult for the ghost minions to find us—but there's no food or water here. I'll be fine, but you won't last long."

Mo Ran smiled. “I didn’t have much to eat growing up. I’m used to it.”

The two recovered for a spell, biding their time while their surroundings quietened. Eventually, they crept out of the alleyway. The cool, rippling moonlight fell upon their figures, one with a shadow, one without, as they walked side by side down the long, empty bluestone street.

“Shizun.” Mo Ran called out.

Chu Wanning waited in silence for him to continue.

“I offended you, earlier, at the gate. Sorry.”

Chu Wanning seemed caught off guard. Then his eyes flicked down, his long lashes obscuring his gaze. “It’s fine.”

“Due to the circumstances, my words were…also offensive. I’m sorry about that too.”

Chu Wanning listened without responding.

“It was also incredibly improper of me to say you were already married. I’m sorry again.”

Chu Wanning stopped in his tracks. “How long are you going to keep saying *I’m sorry*?” he snapped, his voice icy. “Don’t you know how to say anything else?!”

“Something else?” Mo Ran’s heart started to race. He thought very hard for a moment, then, very carefully, tried a change in wording. “Then…I apologize?”

Chu Wanning shook out his sleeves and stalked off without a word.

Poor Mo Ran had absolutely no idea what he’d said to make his shizun unhappy. On the one hand, he was worried he had further irritated him; on the other, he was afraid that, if he continued, Chu

Wanning would become only more incensed. He stood and scratched his head, then followed obediently.

"Shizun."

"Mn?"

As he strode to catch up, Mo Ran asked in spite of himself, "Have you ever…experienced any karmic events?"

Chu Wanning stopped and turned to face him. "What do you mean?"

"I found another earth soul of yours in the underworld, which means you have one extra piece of soul compared to everyone else… Earlier, I met Chu Xun at Tailwind Hall and asked him about it. He said the extra soul likely wasn't yours originally." Mo Ran continued, hesitant, "But, including your body in the mortal realm, I've definitely seen four Shizuns. So I was wondering…if Shizun formed any bonds of fate in the past…"

Chu Wanning was silent for a time. A light flared in the depths of his eyes, like something had occurred to him. But then he closed them and said, "I don't think I have." He paused, then, uncertain and a little confused, asked, "I really have four souls?"

"Mhm."

Chu Wanning didn't know why either. He contemplated it for a while, then sighed. "I don't know the answer, but it doesn't seem to be affecting anything, so let's set it aside for now."

The two carefully padded down remote little paths as they inspected the spiritual strength of the spell the Fourth Ghost King had employed to seal off the second palace.

"All barriers have a weakness," Chu Wanning said as they came before a watchtower. His fingers skimmed across the rough walls, over

which washed an intermittent blue light. He closed his eyes, trying to capture the flow of the energy streaming beneath the stones. But without any spiritual power to draw on, his attempt to feel out the spell drained him in seconds. Chu Wanning let his hand fall and shook his head, dejected. “My soul isn’t whole, and my powers are diminished. I don’t know how to break through this.”

“Why doesn’t Shizun teach me, and I’ll give it a go?” Mo Ran suggested.

“It won’t work. Barriers are a complex art; it’s not something you can learn in a day or two.”

“Then what are the typical weak points of spiritual barriers?” Mo Ran asked. “We could try them one by one.”

Chu Wanning eyed him. “Every barrier has its own weakness. There isn’t a one-size-fits-all method to breaking them. If we were to test them one by one, I can’t imagine how long it would take.”

“How will we know if we don’t try?” Mo Ran smiled. “Who knows? Maybe I’ll get lucky.”

Chu Wanning had opened his mouth to reply when he spotted a white shadow flit past at the edge of his vision. His brows knitted at once, and he extended his hand, moving out of habit to summon Tianwen. Nothing happened. His expression darkened, and he asked sharply, “Who’s there?!”

That white shadow immediately attempted to flee.

Like Mo Ran would let that happen. He darted over and, in one ferocious instant, captured the figure in his arms. He clapped a hand over the ghost’s mouth and nose to prevent it from calling out, then twisted its arms behind its back and forced it to its knees. When he finally got a good look and saw who it was, he couldn’t help but burst out in anger: “Rong Jiu…!”

The young man kneeling on the ground was tender and fair, like willow vines drifting in the breeze, but his eyes brimmed with defiance. He twisted his head away and refused to utter a single word.

“Running off to snitch again?” Mo Ran demanded. “You really think I won’t kill you?!”

Chu Wanning strode over. He had never met Rong Jiu before, and after looking him over, asked Mo Ran, “You know him?”

Mo Ran didn’t know what to say. He thought back on those two crimes of stealing and debauchery, the ones Chu Wanning had publicly tried him for on the Platform of Sin and Virtue. At the time, he’d thought Chu Wanning cruel and malicious, and his heart had been steeped in hatred. Now that this sordid history was once more thrust in his face, Mo Ran wanted nothing more than to find a hole to crawl into and hide.

Chu Wanning, however, noticed none of this. He only took this person to be an acquaintance of Mo Ran. “Since he followed you all the way here, don’t leave him behind in the palace. Once we find a way out, let’s bring him along.” As he spoke, he looked Rong Jiu over carefully, “A perfectly decent person. Reincarnation should be top priority.”

Mo Ran was struck speechless.

Upon hearing these words, Rong Jiu, who had been quietly panicking, was at first taken aback. He suddenly smiled. His eyes softened, and his gaze was gentle and charming as he glanced toward Mo Ran. “This must be Shizun then?”

“What d’you mean *Shizun*; who said you could call him that?!” Mo Ran said angrily. “He’s *my* shizun!”

Rong Jiu was still resentful, so he drawled infuriatingly, “Oh, I see, *my shizun* then.”

“You—!”

Watching this back and forth, Chu Wanning finally detected something amiss. “Mo Ran,” he asked, “are there some hard feelings between you two?”

“I…”

“Dear Shizun,” Rong Jiu replied with a smile, “don’t be angry with him. There are no hard feelings between us. Just some past relations.”

His words were ambiguous, but his tone was awfully suggestive. Chu Wanning said nothing, but his eyes narrowed, and his lips slowly pressed themselves into a thin line. His expression at first glance was as indifferent as ever, but there was a gloominess between his brows that couldn’t be fully concealed. Rong Jiu had grown up in a brothel and was adept at reading expressions. How could Chu Wanning, pure and naïve as he was, hide the emotion flickering in his eyes from Rong Jiu?

Rong Jiu was rather shocked. All this time he’d thought Mo Ran a sleazy philanderer, audaciously in love with his own shizun. Yet unexpectedly, now that he’d met the shizun in question, it didn’t seem one-sided.

…How filthy this Sisheng Peak was.

Despite his current peril, Rong Jiu still couldn’t help but sigh. He was both disgusted and amazed. Dual cultivation between men was not unheard of in the cultivation realm, but it was considered unseemly nonetheless. Mo Ran was a young gongzi of Sisheng Peak. If word got out that he and his benefacting mentor were an item, Sect Leader Xue Zhengyong would be unable to show his face in public.

Rong Jiu blinked his expressive peach-blossom eyes and sized up Chu Wanning. He parted his lips to say a few more words, ready to add oil to the flames, but Chu Wanning spoke first. “You’re already dead. What’s the point in bringing up ‘past relations.’”

“Well, wasn’t Xianjun the one who asked me?” Rong Jiu smiled. “I

only answered honestly."

"Who asked you," Chu Wanning said frostily. "I was asking him."

There was no need to clarify who "him" was. Chu Wanning's tone was laced with sparks. His meaning couldn't have been clearer: *don't get friendly with me*. When Mo Ran heard Chu Wanning taking his side, Mo Ran's heart swelled, and warmth bloomed in his chest. He wanted to say something, but before he could move in closer, Chu Wanning had already turned around in a huff. "You deal with this."

Mo Ran didn't know what to do. If he let Rong Jiu go, there was a chance the little tart would turn around and rat on them. But keeping Rong Jiu around would be like carrying a barrel of gunpowder—if he were to run his mouth in front of Chu Wanning, his shizun just might choke to death.

As Mo Ran agonized, Chu Wanning went back to inspect the Fourth Ghost King's barrier once more. The second he was out of earshot, Mo Ran yanked Rong Jiu by the collar and ground out, voice hushed, "What do you want?"

"It's just that I'm *profoundly* irritated." Rong Jiu's thick lashes flickered softly, and a faint light shimmered in his gaze. "I can't bear to see a villain like you get a do-over."

But Mo Ran had a good handle on Rong Jiu's character. He wasn't the kind of person who would allow himself to come to harm for the sake of harming others; he'd only ever choose a course that'd harm others and benefit himself. Resentful as he might be, his top priority was to spend his days in comfort. He had no reason to risk death to follow them.

Mo Ran's eyes swept over Rong Jiu and landed on his feet. Only one shoe adorned his delicate and fair foot. The other was bare and smeared with mud—he had obviously fled somewhere in a hurry.

Mo Ran narrowed his eyes. “Tell the truth.”

“Didn’t I already say it?” Rong Jiu asked. “The truth is I can’t stand—”

“If you’re thinking of trying to blackmail me with more lies, I will blindfold and gag you, then toss you down a well. You’re already a ghost, so you won’t die from hunger, and you won’t be able to escape. If you’re lucky, the patrol may find you in a couple days. If you’re not, prepare to be stuck in that well for eight to ten years.” Mo Ran paused, and when he continued, his voice was deep and dark. “You decide.”

As expected, Rong Jiu blanched. “I changed my mind,” he said. “I don’t want to stay here. You have to take me with you.”

“What, don’t wanna be a ghost husband anymore?”

Rong Jiu bit down hard on his lip. Then he angrily raised his head and said, “I want to live a normal life too. I want another start.” He inhaled deeply and declared, “I want to be reincarnated.”

“Fine. Then let me ask you another question: Were you the one who blabbed to the patrol and told them where I was?”

Rong Jiu didn’t answer.

“Even if you don’t wanna say, I have ways to make you ’fess up.” A red light glimmered in Mo Ran’s hand, and he commanded, voice low, “Speak.”

“Yes, I was the one who told. But so what?” Rong Jiu held his head high, his eyes shining with resentment. “If I didn’t tell them so they all went to look, how could I have escaped?”

Mo Ran released Rong Jiu’s collar and flung him away, laughing through his fury. “Well, you certainly know how to hit someone when they’re down, I’ll give you that.”

“I’m not bad at slander, either.” Rong Jiu put himself back

together slowly, patting his robes back into place. He shot a look at Chu Wanning, who stood just a short distance away. “Mo-xianjun, you really care about him, don’t you? What if I told him *all* about how you used to dote on me? I wouldn’t even need to exaggerate. How do you think he’d take it?”

Chapter 117:
Shizun Tells Me to Get the Hell Out

WHAT RONG JIU MEANT to imply, of course, was that Chu Wanning would certainly become upset and jealous, that he wouldn't be able to handle hearing such things.

But Mo Ran had no idea that Chu Wanning had actually loved him all along. He mulled it over, and only thought that Rong Jiu was threatening to tell Chu Wanning about his past indiscretions. For a master to have to sit by and listen to his own disciple's many outrageous acts recounted one by one—how mortifying would that be? Wouldn't he drop dead from anger?

So he snapped, "You leave him alone!"

Rong Jiu smiled coquettishly, beautifully effeminate even as a man. "If you protect me and take me with you, I promise I'll behave," he said softly. "I won't breathe a word or make a bit of trouble."

Mo Ran was left with no choice. He cursed under his breath and turned to walk back toward Chu Wanning. Rong Jiu followed gleefully at his heels; he knew silent acquiescence when he saw it. But Mo Ran had barely taken two steps before he turned on his heel and pointed a finger at Rong Jiu. "If you put so much as a toe out of line, Rong Jiu," he hissed, low and threatening, "I'll make sure to scatter your soul before you can even *touch* the gate of reincarnation."

Rong Jiu was the picture of affected coyness as he replied sweetly, "You don't mess with me, and I won't mess with you. I'll behave as long as you don't mistreat me. Shouldn't you of all people know what I'm like, Mo-xianjun? You're my old regular, after all."

Mo Ran didn't know what to say. He was as disgusted now by those soft, saccharine tones as he had been fond of them in the past life. But there was absolutely nothing he could do about it. He watched Rong Jiu drift over to Chu Wanning's side. Mo Ran really couldn't understand it. Had he been blind back then or what? Song Qiutong, Rong Jiu… How the hell had he managed to fall for these people?

If he could be reborn into his old life and face his past self, he'd give anything to grab Taxian-jun by the neck and open his head up, just to see how much water had gotten in there. Seriously, what the *hell* was he thinking?

Luckily, Rong Jiu hadn't said anything outright, and Chu Wanning was basically a blank slate when it came to matters of the heart. After a few words of explanation smilingly delivered by seasoned veteran Rong Jiu, Chu Wanning's tightly furrowed brow gradually relaxed. By the end, he was quite convinced that *he* was the one with the impure thoughts, to have so misunderstood what this young man meant by "past relations" earlier. Though his expression remained unchanged, he secretly felt rather embarrassed about the whole thing.

If Rong Jiu meant to tag along, he had to earn his keep. He was the one most familiar with the palace, so he shared his knowledge of the place. "This street isn't well-trafficked, but it's not exactly hidden," he said. "Let's go somewhere a little more secure while you two figure out how to break the barrier."

This "somewhere" was a storehouse for clothing and textiles in the underworld. Bolts upon bolts of white burlap cloth were piled high within—a perfect hiding spot.

The trio picked a dusty corner to hole up in. Chu Wanning felt along the wall with his fingertips as if taking a patient's pulse, trying his best to feel out the spiritual barrier currently covering the entire second

palace. But after a long while, he had still made no progress, while his soul grew increasingly weaker for his efforts. Mo Ran placed his hand over Chu Wanning's and tugged it off the wall. "Get some rest."

Frustrated and helpless, Chu Wanning seethed as he stared at his own hand. "Why is this soul missing *spiritual powers* of all things?"

"What if I give you some of mine?"

"I wouldn't be able to use it." Chu Wanning glanced at Rong Jiu sitting off in the distance and lowered his voice. "You're a living person, I'm a ghost. Yin and yang energies are dissonant."

After a short break, Chu Wanning was back at it. If he'd had his other three souls and his spiritual powers, he could have simply sent a burst of spiritual energy into the barrier and pinpointed the weakness in the Fourth Ghost King's spell. But right now, he had hardly any spiritual energy at all. Although he forced what tiny bit he had into the barrier, trying to seek out its weakness, it was hopelessly difficult, like looking for a single leaf in the vast ocean.

Two hours passed in this manner. Rong Jiu was starting to get restless. He ran over and tugged at Mo Ran. "So, can we get out or not?"

"Knock it off and go sit down," said Mo Ran.

"Come on, I'm worried sick. Just tell me if we can get out or not."

"Worrying won't do you any good. Be patient."

"Isn't your shizun supposed to be super powerful?" Rong Jiu whined. "It's been ages. Why isn't anything happening?"

"He only has one of his three souls, and this one's missing spiritual powers. Can you just shush?"

His words seemed to leave Rong Jiu dejected, and his lovely lashes flickered as he sat back down on the pile of white burlap cloth.

Two more hours passed, and then some. Rong Jiu got up and

padded over to Chu Wanning. “Xianjun, is there no other way?”

Fingertips still pressed to the wall, Chu Wanning replied without opening his eyes, “No.”

“Th-then, is there any way to recover at least some of your powers?”

Chu Wanning thought for a moment. “Do you have any spiritual energy?” he asked.

“No…” Rong Jiu was taken aback. “Why does Xianjun ask?”

“If you did, you could’ve passed me some to use.”

“It’s that easy?” Rong Jiu exclaimed. “Then hurry, have Mo-xianjun…”

Chu Wanning cut him off. “His is useless.”

Rong Jiu of course didn’t know that Mo Ran wasn’t truly a ghost. As soon as he heard that Mo Ran’s spiritual energy couldn’t be used, his smile froze on his face. “How come?”

“Different elements is all.” Mo Ran cut in. He knew Chu Wanning was awful at lying, and it’d be best if Rong Jiu didn’t learn the truth about his less-than-ghostly state. “Can you *please* just go keep watch outside and tell us if you see anyone coming?”

Rong Jiu shot him an irate glare. But the three of them were all in the same boat right now, so he dragged his feet over to the storehouse entrance and reluctantly leaned against the door, picking at his nails as he peered about outside with that pair of hazy peach-blossom eyes.

Mo Ran glanced over at him before taking a seat next to Chu Wanning. He hesitated for some time, but in the end, he decided he didn’t want to keep anything from him. “Shizun,” he spoke up. “I… I want to apologize for some wrongs I’ve committed.”

“What wrongs?”

“Um. Do you remember that time you had me reprimanded at the Platform of Sin and Virtue, for…” Mo Ran paused, too embarrassed to say *debauchery*. A person’s face truly was a mysterious thing: thick as the Great Wall when they didn’t care, thin as a sheet of paper—and just as flimsy—the moment they did. Mo Ran lowered his head bashfully. In a small voice, he said, “…for breaking the fourth, ninth, and fifteenth commandments.”

The fourth commandment: thievery.

The ninth commandment: debauchery.

The fifteenth commandment: deceit.

Of course Chu Wanning hadn’t forgotten. He opened his eyes but didn’t look at Mo Ran. “Mn.”

When he saw that cool, disciplined expression, Mo Ran felt doubly ashamed. He dropped his gaze and, after a second, whispered, “Shizun, I’m sorry.”

Chu Wanning had already guessed what he was going to say. He did feel aggrieved, but he had ever kept a level head in difficult situations. Besides, it wasn’t as though he was only now learning of the sleazy things Mo Ran did back then. “Weren’t you already punished for that?” he replied coolly. “And there was no repeat of those offenses—why bring it up now?”

“Because that Rong Jiu outside…he’s…”

Mo Ran couldn’t finish the sentence, and Chu Wanning was also silent for a long while. Then Mo Ran heard him scoff. “So he’s the one?”

“Mm.” He didn’t dare look up. Sisheng Peak didn’t require its disciples to abstain from worldly pleasures, and it was perfectly ordinary for its young people to dual cultivate or see a lover outside the sect. But Chu Wanning was different. His cultivation path upheld purity of heart and mind, and he had always treated carnal matters with contempt.

Not to mention, Mo Ran hadn't even been properly seeing someone back then like a normal young person, but had instead slept around in brothels…

Xue Zhengyong might not have cared much, given how he spoiled his nephew. Mo Ran was of age, and it wasn't like he cultivated the path of purity. Anyway, it wouldn't be healthy for a young man to suppress his needs—thus his uncle would close one eye and let it go.

But Chu Wanning couldn't tolerate it. He'd be disgusted. Mo Ran had already witnessed such a reaction when he'd been punished on the Platform of Sin and Virtue. In Chu Wanning's eyes back then, he had clearly seen his disgust, contempt, and loathing. It had already been so many years, and he hadn't whored or stolen since. But now Chu Wanning had run into Rong Jiu in the underworld—how could it possibly not bother him? At that moment, Mo Ran truly felt the weight of the words "you reap what you sow."

He wasn't afraid of being scolded or hit by Chu Wanning—in fact, he'd prefer if he took out Tianwen at once and delivered another round of lashing—just as long as nothing went awry, as long as the earth soul he had gone through so much to find didn't sweep off in a huff over this past affair. If Chu Wanning were to leave in a fit of rage, Mo Ran really might kill himself.

The more he'd thought about it, the more uneasy he'd felt. Rather than keeping Rong Jiu around like a powder keg on legs, he figured it'd be better to come clean himself and apologize to Chu Wanning upfront.

He'd had it all planned out. He had deliberately placed himself between Chu Wanning and the door as he confessed. That way, if his shizun tried to stalk off after hearing him out, he could grab him, tie him up if necessary—whatever offense he had to resort to—to prevent him from disappearing and leaving Mo Ran behind. Chu Wanning could

be as furious as he liked *after* this was all over.

Mo Ran was mentally practicing how to block off Chu Wanning's escape routes when the fabric of Chu Wanning's robes shifted slightly in the gloom. The dim light caught on scarlet silk and golden embroidery. Even Mo Ran's heart was trembling as he ventured in a small voice, "Shizun…"

"This is all ancient history, and punishment's already been meted out," Chu Wanning said. "So what're you telling me all this for?" He cast Mo Ran a sidelong glance, his face coolly indifferent as his thin lips parted deliberately, even a touch sardonically. "Why should I care?"

Something like *why should I care* was the last thing Mo Ran had expected him to say. Mo Ran was dumbstruck. He didn't taste any of the vinegar dripping from Chu Wanning's words. All he felt was panic—he thought his shizun had lost all hope in him, didn't want to bother with him anymore, didn't care about him anymore. "Shizun," he said frantically, "everything in the past was totally my fault, please don't be mad…"

"Why would I be mad. What's there to be mad about." Despite his words, the more Chu Wanning thought about it, the more irritated he felt. Finally he snapped, heated, "I *knew* things weren't so clean between the two of you. 'Past relations' indeed. Are you still trying to pull the wool over my eyes? Get out."

Mo Ran said nothing.

"Out!" Chu Wanning was painfully aware of the sourness in his voice. He well knew this affair was over and done, yet he couldn't help but mutter under his breath, "Absolutely shameless."

Mo Ran did not get out. Instead, he continued to sit dumbly next to Chu Wanning, staring at him with that pair of bright, insistent black eyes. After a moment he said, "I'm not leaving."

Chu Wanning was incensed. “Leave! I don’t want to see you right now!”

“I’m not leaving,” Mo Ran mumbled. He sat and refused to budge, like a stupid piece of rock. He was such a despicable person, yet as he stared at Chu Wanning, the rims of his eyes growing red, he was somehow also a bit pitiful, a bit stubborn.

“I’m afraid that if I go, you’ll run away… Shizun, don’t leave me behind.”

Chu Wanning fell silent. He’d never imagined that *this* was what had been on Mo Ran’s mind. It was true that he felt revolted every time this affair was brought up, but it wasn’t news to him. He was also aware of the common practice in the cultivation world. Be it men or women, once they came of age—provided their cultivation path was not one that forbade it—practically everyone indulged in some degree of dissolution. It was nothing to raise eyebrows at.

Mo Ran was no Xue Meng. His cousin had grown up sheltered and coddled, with upstanding parents and a strict education. He’d always been well-behaved, unlike some other young masters. But Mo Ran? A willful personality, always doing whatever he liked. Raised in the pleasure houses. No father, and a courtesan for a mother. He was a wild, unruly pup who had grown up without guidance, and screwed around day in and day out for fifteen years before his uncle plucked him from the mire, his fur covered in mud.

Only an idiot would think he was clean and pure like a fine piece of jade, and Chu Wanning was no idiot. Yet it was one thing to know all that, and quite another to see Rong Jiu with his own eyes, this beautiful person who had shared Mo Ran’s bed in the past. Chu Wanning was still grossed out.

He’d failed to shoo Mo Ran away, so he turned back to the wall,

closed his eyes, and went back to checking the barrier. But as he worked, he couldn't help thinking about Rong Jiu's pretty little oval-shaped face; that fair, tender-looking skin that was surely soft and smooth to the touch. And those pert little lips, petal-pink and dripping honeyed words… That damnable Mo Ran had certainly kissed them before. That slender waist, that figure… In spite of himself, he even thought about how Mo Ran must have been all tangled in bed with that effeminate little thing. How revolting!

When it came to some things, hearing about them was an altogether different matter from seeing with one's own eyes. Now that he had seen, he couldn't help thinking about it, and the more he thought about it, the less he could stomach it. Chu Wanning's eyes suddenly snapped open, flames of anger blazing within. He stood up and shoved Mo Ran away none-too-gently. "Get the hell out."

"Shizun…"

"Out."

Mo Ran had no choice but to lower his head and trudge slowly out of the storehouse.

Rong Jiu was surprised to see him. "Oho, Mo-xianjun, did you quarrel with your shizun?"

Mo Ran didn't even want to acknowledge him. Just the sight of him gave him a headache. He had been fond of him in the past life because he looked somewhat like Shi Mei, and when he had slept with him after his rebirth in this life, it had been with a grudge and the intent of screwing him over. But be that as it may, his past deeds were like marks carved into a wooden post, impossible to restore to its original state.

"I'll keep watch by myself," Mo Ran said. "Go find somewhere else to sit."

Seeing as the door was the least safe place in the storehouse, Rong Jiu was only too happy to comply. But after walking a mere two steps away, he couldn't resist a look back at Mo Ran. He was a little curious as to how Mo Ran had died. How had his personality changed so much in the few years since they had last seen each other? It was as if he'd gone through some kind of harrowing experience. Truly *quite* curious.

Pretty lashes aflutter, Rong Jiu looked Mo Ran up and down from where he stood behind him. He had a sudden feeling that something was a little odd. He examined him again, more carefully this time. His gaze came to a rest on the smudge of a shadow at Mo Ran's feet…

Rong Jiu froze in shock.

Chapter 118:
Shizun Sometimes Falls for Tricks Too

MO RAN HAD a shadow. He…wasn't dead?

A panoply of little details flashed through Rong Jiu's mind. The shock would've sent a chill up his spine and a rush of hot blood to his head to scramble his thoughts if he weren't already dead.

Rong Jiu stood unmoving for some time. The way a person reacted to unforeseen events often had to do with what they were accustomed to. For instance, some people's past experiences made them habitually jumpy, and they would freeze up at the first sign of the unexpected. Then there were people like Xue Meng, darling of the heavens, who were self-possessed and difficult to ruffle, unfazed by just about everything.

As for Rong Jiu, who had wallowed in the mud all his life and suffered every manner of hardship, his immediate thoughts were: Did it pose a threat to him? And if not, how could he benefit from it?

Within seconds, he realized, first, that Mo Ran was a living person who had snuck into the underworld, and second, that he stood to gain much from this knowledge. He merely needed to expose Mo Ran, and he'd have done the underworld a great service. Such an achievement would undoubtedly land him an official position of some sort, and from there he could strut about with his chest puffed out. So what if he had sold his body in life? If he seized this opportunity, he could at least move up in the world, as men ought, in death.

The opportunity was practically handed to him on a silver platter. Why bother with reincarnation? He could skip all that and secure a

comfortable life without delay. It would be a complete upset; he would erase all his past disgrace and start fresh.

Rong Jiu's peach-blossom eyes narrowed subtly, and something flickered within. He could see it now—being bestowed positions of import and titles of nobility, sitting behind draped silks on a bamboo sedan chair like those officials of the underworld, a picture of poise as he floated above the throng of ghosts below.

The more Rong Jiu thought about it, the more gleeful he felt. There was just one problem: he was weak and delicate, and there was no way he could sneak out from under Mo Ran's nose to go tell on him. He'd need to keep Mo Ran occupied…

The gears in his mind turned, and his gaze fell on the red-robed Chu Wanning.

"Chu-xianjun." Rong Jiu greeted Chu Wanning and took a seat next to him, his cheek propped in his hand. Chu Wanning continued to probe at the barrier without so much as a grunt of acknowledgement. The man was so cold Rong Jiu could practically see a layer of frost on his closed lashes.

Rong Jiu tried again. "Still nothing?"

A few moments passed. Chu Wanning still didn't reply, but neither did he chase him off. So Rong Jiu sat and chattered idly about this and that, as if talking to himself. Eventually, he muttered in a soft voice. "To tell you the truth, Chu-xianjun, I wasn't completely honest with you earlier. There's something… I was afraid you'd look down on me if you knew, that you would harden your heart against me and leave me behind."

Chu Wanning's pitch-black brows were drawn tightly together, and though he had yet to speak, a flame of anger burned between them. He was still maintaining tight control, restraining himself from letting it out

—but how could Rong Jiu possibly miss that flickering light?

"I was thinking it over while I was outside," Rong Jiu said in his delicate voice. "I feel *so* terrible about lying to Xianjun, so I wanted to come say sorry…"

As luck would have it, his opener just so happened to match Mo Ran's. Both of them wanted to say "sorry."

Chu Wanning wasn't even that repulsed until Rong Jiu opened his mouth and came out with these words. He finally, slowly, opened his eyes and, keeping his gaze trained on the wall, asked in a frosty tone, "Which brothel did you work at when you were alive?"

Rong Jiu was caught off guard. "Xianjun…already knew?" He stole a glance over at Mo Ran and swore internally. To think that guy had actually come clean on his own. Would it be enough for Rong Jiu to fan the flames like this? "Mo-xianjun and I…"

Chu Wanning cut him off. "I said, which brothel did you work at when you were alive?"

Rong Jiu bit his lip. "The Immortal Peach Pavilion in Black Bamboo Town."

"Hm, Immortal Peach Pavilion." Chu Wanning repeated the name with a wry tug of his lips. Though he said no more, his expression was terrifying.

Rong Jiu snuck several glances at him. Then he pursed his lips and ventured, "You don't look down on me, do you, Chu-xianjun?"

Chu Wanning did not reply.

"I lived a hard life and had a feeble body, and was sold to the brothel very young. If I'd had a choice, of course I'd want to be a demon-slaying hero like Xianjun, too." Rong Jiu sighed wistfully. "It'd be wonderful if, in my next life, I could become an outstanding person

like Xianjun."

"Reincarnation won't change the nature of a soul," Chu Wanning said, impassive. "My condolences, but you and I belong to different walks of life."

Even after being shut down like this, Rong Jiu's smile didn't falter in the slightest. "I know I could never compare with Xianjun," he said, lowering his gaze. "It was just wishful thinking. When it comes to people like me, if we don't give ourselves something to hope for, a dream to cling to, we wouldn't last a year in the brothels before plotting how to end it all."

No response. Rong Jiu glanced at Mo Ran out of the corner of his eye, checking to make sure he was out of earshot of their little chat. "After all," he continued with a soft sigh, "the guests at the brothel were so often cruel and callous. They hardly saw us as human. In a place like that, receiving a visit from a kindly guest like Mo-xianjun was a thing to be envied."

Chu Wanning remained silent, but the veins on the back of his hand stood out where it was pressed against the wall. Had he still possessed his powers, there would undoubtedly be five holes in that wall right now. He seemed to struggle with himself for a long moment. Finally, he asked, voice dark and low, "What's there to be envious of?"

A trace of affection blossomed on Rong Jiu's gentle, lovely face—not too much nor too little, precisely the right amount. "That Mo-xianjun is a good person, of course. Although he might have erred and stolen from me in the end, I can only imagine it's because I served him poorly in the past. He'd always been such a reasonable, charming person."

Chu Wanning's face was cold and indifferent as he listened without a word.

“Everyone who ever served him at my place mentioned how good and kind he was. We always looked forward to his next visit.”

After a long pause, Chu Wanning asked, “Did he go often?”

Rong Jiu feigned a dry laugh. “How often is ‘often’? I’m not quite sure how to answer Xianjun’s question.”

“Then tell me how regularly he went, for whom he asked, and when his last visit was.” Those thin lips were like a pair of knives, and each question glinted with a cold, dangerous light, as if aiming for Mo Ran’s life.

Rong Jiu pretended not to notice the frosty gleam in Chu Wanning’s eyes. Embellishing liberally, he answered, “I really didn’t keep track of how often he came, but I used to see him at least ten days a month, if not more. As for whom he asked for…it varied.” Rong Jiu sighed. “It’s all in the past now, Chu-xianjun, so please don’t hold it against him…”

“I asked when his last visit was.” By now, Chu Wanning’s face might as well have been one thick layer of ice. “Answer the question.”

Mo Ran in fact had never gone back to see Rong Jiu after the day he’d been reborn, nor had he visited any other brothel. But Rong Jiu took one look at Chu Wanning’s expression and knew the truth wouldn’t do. He feigned uncertainty and stoked the flames some more. “I’m…not sure. But I do remember seeing Mo-xianjun around the brothel now and again, up until the time I died…so probably around then?”

He had barely finished when Chu Wanning shot to his feet, pulling his hand from the wall so that his wide sleeve fell over his slender fingers. In the murky dark, his eyes blazed with sparks, and his entire body trembled.

Rong Jiu was privately delighted. This guileless xianjun was too easy to fool. Rong Jiu was a prostitute, a veteran in the arena of love

affairs, an expert at reading the feelings of others. Baiting someone so virtuous and upright as Chu Wanning was child's play. He had him hook, line, and sinker.

Rong Jiu had carefully prepared a nervous expression, and he deployed it now. "What is it, Chu-xianjun?" he asked anxiously. "Did I say something wrong? T-they're all misdeeds of a previous lifetime now; please don't blame Mo-xianjun… He…he's not a bad person…"

"Like I need you to tell me if he's a bad person or not!" Chu Wanning snapped. He shook with fury. "If I want to teach my own disciple a lesson, what business is it of yours?!"

"Chu-xianjun…"

Chu Wanning ignored him completely. A chill emanated from his gaze even as sparks flew from the rage that blazed in his eyes. Rong Jiu attempted to block his way, but Chu Wanning shoved him aside and strode over to the door of the storehouse. He grabbed Mo Ran by the back of his collar and yanked him to his feet.

Mo Ran looked back, startled. "Shizun?"

Chu Wanning retracted his hand, as if even the collar of Mo Ran's robes was too filthy to touch. He stared his disciple down like a cheetah on the hunt, growling low in his throat and preparing to pounce. Yet even after several long seconds passed, he was still much too angry to speak.

What was there to say at this point? If Mo Ran hadn't reformed even after his public reprimand on the Platform of Sin and Virtue—if he had apologized and acted like a decent human being before Chu Wanning all this time, but was in truth still sneaking off to this or that Peach-Parting Pavilion or Cut-Sleeve Lodge to fool around with prostitutes…

Mo Ran had no idea he'd been slandered. All he saw was the

darkness on Chu Wanning's face, his expression one of anger, revulsion, and—though he wasn't sure if he'd imagined it—stifled sadness.

"Mo Weiyu! How many of your words were truth, and how many were lies?" Chu Wanning's voice was hoarse, and his lashes quivered. After a second, he said lowly, "You…really are vile by nature, beyond remedy!"

Those words were like a boulder crashing into the ocean, churning up a massive wave in its wake. Mo Ran flinched violently. He stumbled back two steps, shaking his head, staring at Chu Wanning in dismay. It couldn't be… It *couldn't* be… Those were the words Chu Wanning had spoken in his past life when he'd lost all hope in him. Why would he say that now? Wasn't everything going well?

Mo Ran had no idea what had happened. He flew into a panic. He tried to speak, but Chu Wanning cut him off, the rims of his eyes growing red as anger blazed through his gaze like a wildfire. "How long do you plan to lie to me?!" he asked, voice raw.

Mo Ran's mind was in chaos. What lie? What had Chu Wanning learned? Mo Ran had too many dirty, unspeakable secrets. Faced with Chu Wanning's terrifying glare, he didn't even think to suspect that this was Rong Jiu's doing. Chu Wanning stepped closer, and Mo Weiyu backed away. He retreated farther and farther, until his back hit the wall.

Chu Wanning came to a stop before him. A long interval passed as he stared at Mo Ran's face. When he finally spoke, there was a tightness in his shizun's voice, like he was choking back a sob. "Why do you want me to come back so badly? So you can keep lying to me, angering me, leading me by the nose? I thought you'd turned over a new leaf, Mo Ran. I thought you were worth teaching, that you had changed for the better! I thought I could teach you to be good…" He closed his eyes

slowly. After a pause, he said in a quiet voice, “Incorrigible.”

“Shizun—”

“Get lost.”

Mo Ran fell silent.

“Which part of *get lost* do you not understand?!” Chu Wanning’s eyes flew open, his gaze frosty. “Mo Weiyu, you disappoint me. How can you expect me to pretend I know nothing, to go back to the world of the living with you?”

Mo Ran’s heart clenched. Heedless of Chu Wanning’s anger, he grabbed the wrist within that billowing sleeve and shook his head, begging with teary, reddening eyes. “Shizun, please don’t be angry. Tell me what happened, okay? Whatever I did wrong again, I swear I’ll change. Just please don’t chase me off…”

Change… That’s what Mo Ran had said back then, too. And had he? If Chu Wanning hadn’t met Rong Jiu here, would he have ever found out about these unseemly deeds?!

It was said that concern will make a person rash. Chu Wanning was usually calm and collected, but he had a fiery disposition and acted on emotion when it came to matters of the heart. On top of that, Rong Jiu and Mo Ran had, by Mo Ran’s own admission, shared an improper relationship, and Rong Jiu’s performance had been so convincing that Chu Wanning had fallen for it completely. Unable to pull free from Mo Ran’s grip, Chu Wanning lifted his other hand to summon Tianwen in anger. Of course, nothing appeared. He was mad enough to keel over; if he wasn’t already dead, he would have been spitting blood.

Suddenly, there was a brilliant scarlet radiance as Mo Ran summoned Jiangui. He pressed the willow vine into Chu Wanning’s hand and knelt before his shizun. His other hand remained firmly wrapped around Chu Wanning’s wrist; he was scared to death he might

leave. “Shizun, I know I…I’ve done plenty of things that made you angry and upset in the past… But since coming down to the underworld, every word I’ve said has been true.” He lifted his head, eyes brimming with tears. “All of it was true. I didn’t lie to you.”

Chu Wanning clenched his hand around Jiangui. His heart burned with rage, yet at the same time, he felt unbearably pained. Mo Ran’s fingers were wrapped so tightly around his wrist; they trembled uncontrollably, despairingly, but refused to let go. His agony was so palpable it nearly pierced the depths of Chu Wanning’s soul. How could he possibly not feel it?

“If Shizun is upset,” Mo Ran continued, “if Shizun can’t forgive me, then please strike me, yell at me—anything is fine. And if you really don’t wish to see me again… If you think I…if you think I’m…vile by nature, beyond remedy…” Mo Ran’s voice broke on that phrase. He bowed his head where he knelt before Chu Wanning. “If Shizun really… doesn’t want me anymore…” He didn’t want Chu Wanning to see him cry, but he couldn’t stop the shaking of his shoulders as silent tears soaked the ground beneath him. “Then I’ll…I’ll leave Sisheng Peak…and never…never show my face before Shizun again… But please…please, I’m begging you…”

His forehead was nearly touching the muddy ground where he knelt, but his hand still gripped Chu Wanning’s wrist so tightly, so stubbornly, as if he’d sooner die than let go. “Please, don’t leave.”

Chu Wanning was silent.

“Shizun…”

Chu Wanning closed his eyes.

“You promised you’d come back with me, so please don’t leave…”

Chu Wanning’s chest ached. He was only a fragment of a soul, so how could he still feel like his heart was being stabbed by knives,

scorched by flames? His eyes snapped open, shining with anger and resentment. “I promised you? Then what about what you promised me? Back at the Platform of Sin and Virtue, you said you’d seen the error of your ways, and then when you knelt in Clearsky Hall, you said you’d never do it again—so why didn’t you keep your word?! Did you really think I wouldn’t find out, Mo Weiyu?! That I wouldn’t discipline you again?!”

Mo Ran started. He raised his head in a foggy haze of confusion and looked up through tear-filled eyes. “What?”

The word had barely left his lips when Jiangui flashed out bright and scarlet, tearing viciously toward the side of his face. There was an eruption of crackling sparks, and blood splattered across the ground and the wall.

Chu Wanning was incandescent with rage. He hadn’t held back a whit. A bloody gash opened on Mo Ran’s cheek, bleeding profusely. But he paid it no mind as he clutched at Chu Wanning’s hand. “What do you mean the Platform of Sin and Virtue?” he asked, wide-eyed. “What about Clearsky Hall? I…what am I keeping from you? What am I lying about?”

His questioning only made Chu Wanning more furious. He tried to shake off Mo Ran’s hand again, but his grip was like iron.

Mo Ran suddenly realized something was off here. He whipped his head around to look back toward the storehouse. While the two of them were quarreling and completely distracted, Rong Jiu had snuck off!

He saw at once what had happened, and his expression shifted. “Shizun—we fell for his trap! Come on, we’ve gotta go! It’s not safe here anymore! Hurry!”

He made a dash for the door, pulling Chu Wanning behind him, but they had barely made it two steps when Rong Jiu appeared in the

distance leading a group of ghost soldiers. Even now, he was still tattling. “They’re right this way, that living person and the soul that’s with him…the two of them…”

“I should’ve killed you!” Mo Ran roared furiously.

There was no time to explain. Mo Ran led the way, holding tight to Chu Wanning’s hand as they sped down streets and alleyways. The number of their pursuers swelled, and the sounds of sentry whistles and clappers rang throughout the palace grounds. Chu Wanning glanced back to see four or five distinct groups of lanterns stream from the main alleys to gather into one mass, like a hissing snake of fire on the hunt.

Rong Jiu’s face was fair glowing with glee as he chased Mo Ran and Chu Wanning. That frail body of his, weak from years of hardships and abuse, was pushed to its limit; he ran like a famished jackal bounding after its prey. He truly believed he had earned himself a great credit by being the first to sniff them out and turn them in. Drunk on this feeling of accomplishment, he unexpectedly mustered an aura of command. “Catch them! Catch the living intruder!”

Someone grabbed his arm mid-stride. Rong Jiu whipped around angrily, then faltered when he saw it was the captain of the guard who had caught him earlier. “What’re you grabbing me for?” he snapped, indignant. “Hurry and catch that man up ahead there!”

“Sure, they’re runaways, but aren’t you one as well?” The captain narrowed his eyes, leveling him with a malicious gaze.

“I-I only ran because I wanted to help the fourth lord catch them,” Rong Jiu shot back, now alarmed. “I was the one who found the living person… I was the one who discovered Mo Weiyu isn’t a ghost! Don’t even think about laying hands on me just to steal my credit before the fourth lord!”

The captain was at first rather taken aback. But he soon put two

and two together and burst out laughing. "*You* found him out first? Credit? Ha ha ha! You think I'm here to steal *your* credit?" His laughter stopped abruptly. "How desperate are you for distinction—have you gone mad? The fourth lord himself discovered that living person! You think he'd seal off the entire second palace just to catch some common little ghost? Hah, stealing credit indeed. You must be blind, trying to steal credit from the fourth lord himself!"

In his shock, Rong Jiu stumbled and fell to the ground. He watched as the army of ghost soldiers tramped past him in pursuit of Mo Ran and Chu Wanning. Rong Jiu trembled, and his lips quivered as he muttered, "Already discovered? The ghost king already…saw through them? I…I'm not the first? N-no credit? I…"

All his visions of riches and fame, of being revered and admired by crowds lining the streets, came crashing to the ground to be crushed underfoot by the army stampeding past all around him. Rong Jiu stared vacantly for a while. Then he suddenly flew into a frenzy, straining with every fiber of his being to struggle free. His frail body was like a mayfly, lowly yet unwilling to bend to fate, a moth flying into a hungry flame.

His life had never been easy. All he'd ever known was a bed, men, wealthy madams, guests who came and went. A small and windowless room, filled with the scented haze from a brass incense burner, where it was impossible to tell dusk from dawn. That was his entire existence. It was a dark, never-ending night. He only wanted to see daybreak. For the sake of that ray of light, that chance at living, that tiny scrap of hope, he had been willing to abandon his dignity, his body, his honor, his kindness, his conscience. These were all he had.

Flying into the flame for that bit of light.

"Wait! Wait for me! Chu-xianjun, *save me*!"

"Seize that runaway! Once this is squared away, have him sent to

the fourth lord himself for interrogation!"

"No—*No*!" Rong Jiu's pale, bloodless fingers clawed at the ground, his hair falling loose and tangling into a disheveled mess in the struggle. Under the cold light of the moon, his charming, lovely face appeared eerie and terrifying. His eyes bulged as he screamed incoherently, "No! Chu-xianjun, save me!" And then, hysterically, "I found him first! I found the living person! *Me!* You can't treat me like this! You never would've found them if not for me! You just want to steal my reward! *My* credit!"

The soldiers dragged him away, and his mad shrieks were soon drowned out by the heavy thunder of footsteps.

Chapter 119:
Shizun's Four Souls Assembled

CHU WANNING COULDN'T hear the words Rong Jiu was shouting behind them. However, he only needed look around to realize Rong Jiu had purposely provoked him back at the storehouse. He'd made Chu Wanning angry, then seized the opportune moment to escape and snitch.

Chu Wanning was ordinarily the type to think things through rationally no matter the situation. But when it came to anything involving Mo Ran, all his rationality and calm seemed to evaporate into thin air. He was somewhat flabbergasted at the ease with which he'd been hoodwinked by a few words from a pansy like that. He looked to Mo Ran, who was running a few paces ahead of him, and asked in spite of himself, "Did you ever…go back to that Immortal Peach Pavilion afterward?"

Upon hearing this name he himself had nearly forgotten, Mo Ran stumbled. "Rong Jiu, that dirty bastard!" he yelled, furious. "Did he say I went back to Immortal Peach Pavilion?! Why would I?! Shizun, is that why you're mad? Because he said I lied to you?"

Chu Wanning did not reply.

"After the whole thing at the Platform of Sin and Virtue, I never went back to…to those kinds of places. I wouldn't lie to Shizun. If you don't believe me, you can use Jiangui to bind me and ask me then."

After a second, Chu Wanning said, "No need." He glanced down at Jiangui, still tightly gripped in his hand. Thinking how he had just injected spiritual power into the willow vine to whip Mo Ran bloody, without care or reason, that really had been…

Wait, a holy weapon?!

Jiangui's flames illuminated his complexion, bright against the darkness of the night. Chu Wanning stared at it, his mind tossing and turning frantically. He tried reversing the flow of the spiritual power, drawing it from Jiangui into his palm, and instantly felt a strong, abundant power rush in. Suddenly, Chu Wanning knew where he could draw spiritual power. While such power could not flow between the living and the dead, the powers of a holy weapon cared not a bit whether the wielder was a human, ghost, god, or demon. As long as the weapon itself accepted, it made no difference!

It took Mo Ran a second to notice Chu Wanning had fallen behind. Once he did, he immediately turned back and asked anxiously, "Shizun, what is it?" The lash wound on his face still bled, and with those bright black eyes, he looked all the more pitiful.

Chu Wanning pursed his lips, chagrined and a little pained. He felt that he had wronged Mo Ran, yet his pride pointed out that Mo Ran really *had* entangled himself with the likes of Rong Jiu back then, so the lash had not been wholly undeserved. Even after a moment's contemplation, Chu Wanning didn't know what tone he ought to take or with what expression he should face him. He could only go the simplest route and speak with neither emotion nor expression. "Mo Ran, stop. Retreat back to the palace walls."

"To do what?" Mo Ran asked hesitantly.

Chu Wanning's tone was flat. "I'll show you a trick."

Mo Ran was baffled. Before he could wrap his head around his shizun's words, he saw the red light of Jiangui flowing endlessly into the fragment of Chu Wanning's soul, enveloping him in a curtain of flames. Mo Ran's eyes widened as he watched Chu Wanning and Jiangui respond to each other. Then, the flames vanished. The man garbed in

red and gold robes raised the willow vine high, hissing with threads of flames, and turned his head to address him. “Mo Ran, give Jiangui an order.”

Mo Ran now had a vague guess as to what Chu Wanning planned to do, though he could scarcely believe it. He promptly shouted a command: “Jiangui, heed Shizun’s orders as you would mine!”

The willow vine in Chu Wanning’s hand crackled, then erupted into threads of crystal red sparks as the leaves on the vine glowed brilliantly. Chu Wanning raised his free hand and brushed his fingertips inch by inch over Jiangui. The willow vine coursed with a yet brighter radiance in the wake of his touch. The thousands of ghost soldiers were closing in now. Behind them, the barrier-sealed palace walls stood sky-high. There was nowhere to run.

But then, Chu Wanning wasn’t planning to.

Light flared in his eyes and rippled outward, and a tempest roared to life. Chu Wanning’s robes danced in the gale as he held the willow vine high and whipped it ferociously through the air. Jiangui struck out like a soaring dragon, glowing golden, resplendent, illuminating the vast night sky. At Mo Ran’s command, Jiangui no longer rejected Chu Wanning, but instead channeled its abundant spiritual energy ceaselessly into Chu Wanning’s earth soul. His eyes shone with that blinding brilliance, and his voice was deep and steady as he commanded, “Jiangui, Ten Thousand Coffins!”

In that split second, countless streaks of twining gold and red willow vines erupted from the earth with a rumble, lacerating the magnificent palace hall into broken shingles and chunks of bricks. Thick, powerful ancient vines ensnared the ghost soldiers and dragged them in, then locked them down tight.

Mo Ran watched in shock as all of this happened before his eyes.

He saw the holy weapon and the fragment of Chu Wanning's soul working in concert, merging as one. He saw Chu Wanning's robes flutter, his jet-black hair like smoke and clouds. Whether in life or in death, his spirit had always been like this. Earth-shatteringly blazing. Unstoppable.

Taking advantage of this opportunity, Chu Wanning leapt backward and placed his hand on the palace wall. He closed his eyes, and in seconds he had discerned the weak point of the barrier. "Up nine feet, four inches to the right. Attack with fire!"

Mo Ran followed his instructions without hesitation and leapt up. Before any of those ghosts of the second palace could react, the blazing fire spell had taken shape in his palms. He slammed it down right on the spot Chu Wanning had indicated. The earth rumbled and the mountains shook. The impossibly high palace walls rapidly disintegrated and returned to their original height, and the barrier seal shattered as well, crumbling to dust in an instant.

"Go!"

Mo Ran didn't need to be told twice; he hopped atop the wall, then turned to pull Chu Wanning up alongside him. The two broke free of the Fourth Ghost King's second palace, their swift figures disappearing into the boundless night.

In a small, narrow alleyway, Chu Wanning and Mo Ran leaned against opposite walls, both staring at each other, neither saying a word. Mo Ran was the first to crack, letting loose a snicker. "That old ghost will probably be so furious he'll die…*hss*!" As the corners of his mouth drew back, it pulled at the injury on his cheek.

Chu Wanning eyed him. "Stop laughing."

Mo Ran stopped. In the dim alley, his lashes flickered, and his

gentle, pitch-black eyes gazed at Chu Wanning. “Shizun, are you still mad at me?”

If he had said, “Shizun, haven’t you wronged me?” Chu Wanning mightn’t have appreciated it. But instead, he had asked if he was still mad. Chu Wanning wavered for a moment, then resolutely skirted the topic. “Hurry and cast the spell. We barely escaped from the fourth king. He might not have the face to tell the other ghost kings just yet, but we can’t count on that if this drags on any longer.”

The instant Mo Ran heard those words, he knew Chu Wanning wasn’t leaving anymore. He wasn’t going to disappear. And so, his heart that had been drawn taut as a bowstring all this time finally relaxed. He couldn’t help but grin again. “Mn.” But the more he smiled, the more it hurt, and his hand unconsciously rose to cover his cheek.

Chu Wanning eyed him again but said nothing.

Mo Ran produced the soul-calling lantern. He held it carefully before him with both hands and bowed his head as he wordlessly recited the spell. When he’d repeated it thrice, the soul-calling lantern flashed with a blinding light, so bright it made them squint.

Mo Ran could vaguely hear Master Huaizui chanting, carried across the roaring waters of the land of the dead, carried unceasingly past the quiet and peaceful river of forgetfulness.

“Time to return… Time to return…”

The words were difficult to make out, as if they came from a great distance. But after many repetitions, that call to return seemed to come nearer. Then at once, the indistinct voice of Master Huaizui rang in Mo Ran’s ears. “Why are there two earth souls?” The voice held a trace of concern.

Mo Ran closed his eyes and conveyed everything to Huaizui with a thought.

That faint voice fell quiet for a moment before speaking. “You’ve met Chu Xun of Tailwind Hall?”

“Mn.”

A long silence.

“Master?”

“It’s nothing. If Chu-gongzi claims having two earth souls is normal, then it should be as he said,” Huaizui said. “Only—this humble monk has never attempted to call two earth souls back from the ghost realm simultaneously, so this may take longer than expected. I will trouble Mo-shizhu to wait a bit.”

Mo Ran glanced at the fourth king’s second palace. “How *much* longer?” he asked. “We just ran from the Fourth Ghost King’s second palace, and they might catch up to us at any moment…”

“Not too long. Rest assured, Mo-shizhu.” At these words, his voice became fainter still, and was eventually overtaken completely by the sound of the chanting.

Chu Wanning couldn’t hear Huaizui’s voice, and his brows were slightly drawn together as he watched. “What’s going on?”

“There’s something unusual about Shizun’s souls, so the master says we’ll need to wait,” Mo Ran explained. “We’re too close to the second palace here. Let’s get farther away.”

Chu Wanning nodded, and the two walked a ways until they turned a corner. By this time, the skies were beginning to lighten, and the old man who had pointed the way for Mo Ran before was preparing to pack up his wonton stall. When he spotted Mo Ran, he appeared quite astonished. “Aiya! You found him?”

Mo Ran hadn’t expected to bump into this man again and blinked in surprise. “Yes,” he replied, “Yes I did. Thanks so much, Gramps.”

“What’re you thanking me for? It’s all thanks to the little xianjun’s own good luck. Ay…your face is injured?”

“Oh, it’s…it’s a whipping from the ghost soldiers,” Mo Ran grasped for an excuse.

“No wonder. I was gonna say, nothing average can harm a ghost.” The old man sighed. “It looks painful.” He pondered a moment, then reopened the drawer he had packed away and whipped up two bowls of small wontons, which he handed to the pair. “These’re only leftovers I couldn’t sell today, but they’re my treat. Eat something before you go.”

Mo Ran thanked the stall owner, then saw him off. The old man ambled away, taking his stall with him.

Chu Wanning didn’t like scallions or chives, and the old man’s wonton soup was peppered with scallions. Mo Ran picked all the scallions out of his bowl before exchanging it with Chu Wanning’s. “Shizun, why don’t you have this one?”

Chu Wanning fixed him with a look, but didn’t decline. He lifted his spoon and took a careful taste. Mo Ran watched him. The ice-cold soup of the underworld touched his pale lips, neither wontons nor soup diminishing, just the way real ghosts ate.

“Is it good?”

“It’s all right.”

“Not as good as the wontons you make.”

Chu Wanning choked. He looked up and stared dumbfoundedly at the grinning man who sat beside him, chin propped in his hands. Suddenly, Chu Wanning felt like a river mussel whose shell had been pried open and left exposed under the sun, without a single secret left. There was a long pause. “What wontons?” he asked. The Yuheng Elder knitted his brows, his face stern, and feigned ignorance in a valiant attempt to preserve the teacherly dignity that had just been spilled all

over the floor.

"There's no need to hide it anymore." Before that upended dignity could be rescued, it was shattered to pieces by Mo Ran's hand, which had reached out to caress his hair. Chu Wanning was both furious and crestfallen.

"I know everything now."

Chu Wanning looked away.

Mo Ran retrieved the lantern holding Chu Wanning's human soul from his qiankun pouch and placed it beside them on the stone bench. "Shizun was awkward when alive; even in the underworld, it's still only your human soul that's forthright."

"I did make them for you, it was only…"

Mo Ran cocked a brow and gazed steadily at him with a small smile.

It was only because what? Only because I felt bad? Because I didn't want you to starve? Because I regretted it? Those were all words Chu Wanning could never speak aloud.

Chu Wanning thought his own heart suffered an unspeakable affliction. He'd always been far prouder than the average person, and considered things like showing kindness to someone, loving them, or becoming attached to them to be shameful. He had weathered the winds and rains of many years, and had gotten into the habit of solitude, like a stern and solitary tree reaching toward the sky. A great tree like this did not quiver charmingly like flowers, stirring affection in people's hearts. Nor did it sway gently in the breeze like a string of vines, seductive and enticing. He only stood in silence and severity, steady and dependable, wordlessly blocking wind and rain for those who passed by, allowing those under its branches to hide from the scorching sun.

Perhaps he'd grown too tall, his foliage too dense. The people

beneath wouldn't know that he was the one casting the gentle shade they enjoyed, not unless they made a deliberate effort to look up. But of all those travelers going to and fro, not one of them raised their eyes; not one had ever noticed him. After all, most people's line of sight was habitually aimed lower than themselves, or at eye level at most. And so Chu Wanning had gradually grown accustomed to this, so accustomed that it became second nature. He expected it.

But no one in the world was born reliant, or relied upon. There were some who clung to the strong. This type of person would become ever more charming, ever sweeter, and would limber their boneless bodies to curry favor, to beguile, to use honeyed words to carve out their place in the world.

And then there were those like Chu Wanning. From the moment he stepped into the cultivation world, he'd always been the one depended upon. People like him would become ever more steadfast, ever stronger, until at last even their face became iron, their heart steel. This type of person had seen enough of the vulnerability and incompetence of others. They had seen all there was of charm and sweetness, and thus refused to reveal even a kernel of weakness themselves. These were the sword-bearers, always standing at the ready in full armor. They could show no weakness, and they knew nothing of tenderness.

After so long, it was easy to forget that every individual was born with emotions and affections, both fierce and gentle. That every person had, as a child, known how to laugh and cry. Known how to pick themselves up after a fall, while also wishing for a pair of strong arms to help them stand.

Maybe, once upon a time, he had hoped. Hoped that someone would reach down and help him up. But he'd waited once, and there had been no one. A second time, and still, no one. He had experienced

disappointment after disappointment, and he'd gradually grown inured to it. By the time someone, finally, came to help him up, it no longer felt necessary; it only felt shameful.

It's just a little fall. It's not like I broke my leg. No need to make a fuss about it.

And if the leg *was* broken? He was the type to simply think, *It's just a broken leg; it's not like I'm dead. No need to make a fuss about it.*

And what if he *had* died? Even as a ghost, he might think, *Well, I'm already dead, no point fussing about it now.*

This type worked so hard to distance themselves from the fussy melodrama of the weak. Yet, without realizing it, they would instead fall prey to a different kind of melodrama: a pride so stubborn it was like an incurable disease.

Mo Ran stared at this incurable man, waiting to see what he would say. In the end, Chu Wanning didn't say anything at all. He only pressed his lips together and put the spoon down woodenly. He was very unhappy.

Thus, half a moment later, he sprang to his feet. "Try casting the spell again," he said. "I want to go into the soul-calling lantern."

"Ah…" Mo Ran blinked for a second, then laughed. "Is the soul-calling lantern a conch shell, that you can go in and hide when you get embarrassed?"

Chu Wanning presented Mo Ran with a stern and solemn mien. He shook out his sleeves. "Embarrassed? And why, pray tell, should I be embarrassed?"

"Of course, Shizun is embarrassed because—"

"Stop talking!" Chu Wanning exclaimed, angry and startled. He hadn't expected Mo Ran would actually be thick-skinned enough to

come right out with it, and felt as though he'd been pricked by a needle.

"Because Shizun is good to me."

Chu Wanning fell silent.

Mo Ran now rose to his feet as well. The red clouds of the ghost realm sailed across the sky, hiding the dreary crescent moon that had peeked its head out to splash the ground with a layer of fresh frost and illuminate Mo Ran's face. He wasn't laughing anymore—his expression was solemn and sincere.

"Shizun, I know you're good to me. I don't know if you'll still remember all this once your souls have returned, but…no matter what, I still want to say it. From now on, you're one of the most important people on earth to me. This disciple has done a lot of stupid things in the past, and even though I clearly had the best shizun in the world, my heart was filled with resentment and hate. Looking back now, I'm filled only with infinite regret."

Chu Wanning watched him.

"Shizun is the best, best shizun, and this disciple is the worst, worst disciple."

Chu Wanning had at first felt uneasy. But as he listened to Mo Ran try to express himself with his pathetic vocabulary, doing his utmost, yet still so clumsy—Chu Wanning tried to resist, but in the end, he couldn't stifle a faint smile. "I see." He nodded, and repeated, "Shizun is the best, best shizun, and this disciple is the worst, worst disciple. At least you've finally got some self-awareness."

Chu Wanning wasn't a greedy person. He gave freely to others, but never asked much for himself. Perhaps he didn't have Mo Ran's affection. But to be an important person to Mo Ran, to be the best shizun to him? That wasn't so bad. When it came to feelings, he had always been destitute, anyway—desperately poor, yet refusing to beg for

more. And now here was someone willing to give him a small piece of warm flatbread to munch on. He was awfully happy and savored that flatbread in tiny bites. This was enough for him.

That dummy Mo Ran, on the other hand… When he saw that he had made this piece of soul smile as well, he was a bit stunned, and his heart swelled with inexplicable joy. “Shizun, you should smile more. You look prettier when you smile.”

Chu Wanning stopped smiling. Here was that stubbornly prideful disease of his, which made him think “looking pretty” to be the sort of flirtatious praise directed at wild weeds like Rong Jiu. He wanted no part of it.

But Mo Ran, with his woeful judgment, was still agonizingly trying to praise his dear shizun. “Shizun, did you know? When you smile… uh…how can I describe it…” He was wracking his brain trying to think up a phrase that could adequately describe the beauty of the sight he’d just witnessed. Something related to smiles.

The watchmen’s rattle of the underworld clapped thrice again. Inspiration struck. “Of course!” he blurted out. “It’s a smile in the underworld!”[23]

Chu Wanning was speechless, and now he was genuinely mad. He acted like he hadn’t heard, and abruptly pulled his sleeve aside to pick up the soul-calling lantern. “Mo Weiyu,” he scolded sternly, “all this yapping and you still can’t cast the spell? One more word of nonsense and I’ll march back to that fourth king’s palace myself. Better that than returning to the mortal realm to listen to your drivel all day!”

Mo Ran was dumbfounded. “Smile in the underworld”… Had he used it incorrectly? But Chu Wanning *did* have an especially pretty smile, and they *were* currently in the underworld. It—it wasn’t wrong…

Bickering out in the open like this would draw too much attention.

Mo Ran had no idea where he'd misstepped, but if Shizun told him to shut up, he would shut up. Thinking this, he scratched his head and dragged Chu Wanning into a more out-of-the-way corner. The steady chanting in his mind had by this time grown louder. Mo Ran ventured to ask Huaizui, "Master, are you almost ready?"

It was quiet for a moment on the other side. Then came the hollow knocking sound of a wooden bell,[24] and Huaizui's voice, crystal clear, spoke as if right beside his ear: "Almost."

Huaizui's voice had just faded out again when motes of golden light began to diffuse from Chu Wanning's second earth soul. His figure grew fainter and fainter as the golden light scattered until, finally, it shattered into millions of streaming fireflies, which flowed into the soul lamp like the stars of the Milky Way.

Mo Ran could hear Master Huaizui chanting, carried across the roaring waters of the land of the dead, carried unceasingly past the quiet and peaceful river of forgetfulness. "Time to return… Time to return…"

All mortal sufferings were gradually washed to a faded white by the sighs of that Buddhist chanting, distant yet close. Mo Ran hugged the soul-calling lantern and felt his body become lighter and lighter, emptier and emptier.

Dong! One crisp tone from the wooden bell. It cut like a sharp knife, brutally shattering the trance-like recitation.

Mo Ran's eyes flew open, and he jolted back to himself. Everything from the ghost realm had vanished, like he had woken from a long dream. He found himself lying on a bamboo raft moored by Sisheng Peak's Naihe Bridge. The waters beneath the bamboo strips lapped and splashed around him.

The sky was the blue of a crab shell, dyed with a smear of pale red. The bamboo leaves on the shores of the great river danced in the

breeze, the thousands of whispers of their millions of leaves tender in the air. Dawn was about to break.

Mo Ran blinked dazedly. When he discovered the soul-calling lantern he had held in his arms was gone, he sat upright in a rush, scared out of his wits.

"Shizun—!"

"Don't yell," said a voice evenly.

Mo Ran panted like he'd awoken from a nightmare. His face was pale as he turned his head and saw Huaizui kneeling on the shore, knocking on a wooden bell set upon a rock, his clear eyes open. "Even if you yell, he won't hear you."

The soul-calling lantern rested beside to the wooden bell, radiating with light, glowing and magnificent. The force of Chu Wanning's soul was indescribably beautiful.

Huaizui picked up the lantern and rose to his feet. He nodded toward Mo Ran. "You've done very well, young Mo-shizhu."

Mo Ran clambered to his feet as well and leapt easily from the bamboo raft to the shore. He tugged anxiously at Huaizui. "Master, shall we go find Shizun's mortal body in Frostsky Hall? Let's go now! If we wait too long, I'm afraid his souls will disperse again."

Huaizui couldn't hold back a chuckle. "How could the souls disperse so easily? Don't worry; this humble monk has already sent Xue-shizhu to speak with your esteemed sect leader. Chu Wanning's mortal body should now be on its way to the Red Lotus Pavilion. I will go into seclusion there while I perform the rite to transfer your shizun's souls back into his body."

"Then let's go, quickly!" Mo Ran urged. When he saw Huaizui's faint smile, he hastily added, "I mean, do take your time, Master. No rush, no rush." But nothing about him indicated that there was no rush

—his brow was obviously furrowed, his feet were striding forward of their own accord, and he almost wanted to reach out to pull on Huaizui's sleeves.

Huaizui shook his head. He sighed, then said with a smile, "The young shizhu needn't be so impatient."

Mo Ran waved his hands. "No rush, no rush, slow and steady is best."

"Indeed, steadiness is important. When souls leave the body, they cannot immediately return to the flesh. To do so would go against the laws of heaven, and the souls would naturally dissipate. Certainly, this humble monk will go slowly."

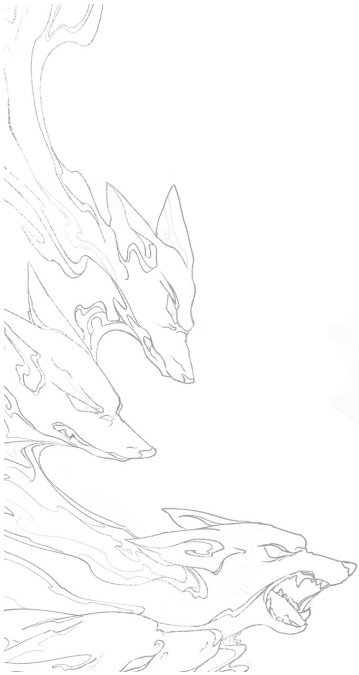
"Right—right, right. Good, good, good, do it slowly." Mo Ran agreed. Even so, he couldn't restrain himself, and after some hesitation, he asked, very carefully, "Then…how long will it take before Shizun comes back to life?"

Huaizai replied tranquilly, "Five years."

"I see, five years is g—*five years*?!" The color drained from Mo Ran's face. He felt like he was choking.

"Five years at least."

Mo Ran was struck absolutely, completely, totally speechless.



THE STORY CONTINUES IN

The Husky & His White Cat Shizun

VOLUME 4

Meatbun's Mini Theatre:
The Little Puppy and the Big White Cat

ONCE UPON A TIME there was a little puppy. He was dirty and stupid, so nobody liked him, and thus he drifted around from place to place without anywhere to call his home.

One day, the little puppy's uncle found him and carried him back to his den. The new den was warm and spacious, and the little puppy was very happy. He was especially taken with the big white cat, which was curled up on the cushion sleeping and looked exceedingly gentle. The little puppy howled and joyfully burrowed into the white cat's soft fur.

However, the big white cat, when awake, was very different than the little puppy had imagined. The cat always watched the puppy with an icy gaze and ignored the puppy's whimpering affection. When the white cat was unhappy, he would seldom even remember to retract his sharp claws before swatting the little puppy across his furry face.

By and by, the little puppy grew into a big dog, and as he did, the big white cat gradually became a small white cat before his very eyes.

The big dog wanted to teach the white cat a lesson. So he bit into the little white cat's throat, and proudly trod that snow-white ball under his great paw. But when he did, he at once realized that this white cat, which he had presumed to be hard as stone, in truth had a body as soft as could be. He couldn't help but remember the night he had first come to his new den, when he had hidden and fallen asleep in the warmth and softness of this kitty's silky fur.

How was the little puppy to know that, on that night, the white

cat had opened his jewel-like eyes. *Where did this little thing come from? How dirty it is,* the white cat thought. Then, using his rough pink tongue, he had quietly groomed the little puppy's fur clean.

The little puppy had stirred under this treatment, bleary-eyed, and thought that he was dreaming. He dreamt that his life of lonely wandering had finally come to end, and that there was a big white cat that treated him very, very kindly.

APPENDIX

Characters, Names, and Locations

Characters

The identity of certain characters may be a spoiler; use this guide with caution on your first read of the novel.

Note on the given name translations: Chinese characters may have many different readings. Each reading here is just one out of several possible interpretations.

MAIN CHARACTERS

Mo Ran

墨燃 Surname Mo, “ink”; given name Ran, “to ignite”

Courtesy name: Weiyu (微雨 / “gentle rain”)

Title(s):

Taxian-jun (踏仙君 / “treading on immortals”)

Weapon(s):

Bugui (不归 / “no return”)

Jiangui (见鬼 / literally, “seeing ghosts”; metaphorically, “What the hell?”)

Spiritual element: Wood

Orphaned at a young age, Mo Ran was found at fourteen by his uncle, Xue Zhengyong, and brought back to Sisheng Peak. Despite his late start, he has a natural talent for cultivation. In his previous lifetime, Chu Wanning’s refusal to save Shi Mei as he died sent Mo Ran into a spiral of grief, hatred, and destruction. Reinventing himself as Taxian-jun, tyrannical emperor of the cultivation world, he committed many atrocities—including taking his own shizun captive—before ultimately

killing himself. To Mo Ran's surprise, he woke to find himself back in his fifteen-year-old body with all the memories of his past self and the opportunity to relive his life with all new choices, which is where the story begins.

Chu Wanning

楚晚宁 Surname Chu; given name Wanning "evening peace"

Title(s):

Yuheng of the Night Sky (晚夜玉衡 / Wanye, "late night"; Yuheng, "Alioth, the brightest star in Ursa Major")

Beidou Immortal (北斗仙尊 Beidou "the Big Dipper," title *xianzun*, "immortal")

Weapon(s):

Tianwen / 天问 "Heavenly Inquiry: to ask the heavens about life's enigmatic questions." The name reflects Tianwen's interrogation ability.

Jiuge / 九歌 "Nine Songs." Chu Wanning describes it as having a "chilling temperament."

Spiritual element: Wood and Metal

A powerful cultivator who specializes in barriers and is talented in mechanical engineering, as well as an elder of Sisheng Peak. Aloof, strict, and short-tempered, Chu Wanning has only three disciples to his name: Xue Meng, Shi Mei, and Mo Ran. In Mo Ran's previous lifetime, Chu Wanning stood up to Taxian-jun, obstructing his tyrannical ambitions, before he was taken captive and eventually died as a prisoner. In the present day, he is Mo Ran's shizun, as well as the target of Mo Ran's mixed feelings of fear, loathing, and lust.

Chu Wanning's titles refer to the brightest stars in the Ursa Major constellation, reflecting his stellar skills and presence. Specifically,

Yuheng is Alioth, the brightest star in Ursa Major, and the Big Dipper is an asterism consisting of the seven brightest stars of the same constellation. Furthermore, Chu Wanning's weapons are named after poems in the *Verses of Chu*, a collection by Qu Yuan from the Warring States Period. The weapons' primary attacks, such as "Wind," take their names from *Shijing: Classic of Poetry*, the oldest existing collection of Chinese poetry. The collection comprises 305 works that are categorized into popular songs and ballads (风, *feng*, "wind"), courtly songs (雅, *ya*, "elegant"), or eulogies (颂, *song*, "ode").

SISHENG PEAK

Xue Meng

薛蒙 Surname Xue; given name Meng "blind/ignorant"

Courtesy name: Ziming (子明 / "bright/clever son")

The "darling of the heavens," Chu Wanning's first disciple, Xue Zhengyong and Madam Wang's son, and Mo Ran's cousin. Proud, haughty, and fiercely competitive, Xue Meng can at times be impulsive and rash. He often clashes with Mo Ran, especially when it comes to their shizun, whom he hugely admires.

Shi Mei

师昧 Surname Shi; given name Mei, "to conceal"

Courtesy name: Mingjing (明净 / "bright and clean")

Early name(s): Xue Ya (薛丫 / Surname Xue, given name Ya, "little girl")

Xue Meng's close friend, Chu Wanning's second disciple, and Mo Ran's boyhood crush. Gentle, kind, and patient, with beautiful looks to

match, Shi Mei often plays peacemaker when his fellow disciples argue, which is often. Where Mo Ran and Xue Meng are more adept in combat, he specializes in the healing arts.

Xue Zhengyong

薛正雍 Surname Xue; given name Zhengyong, “righteous and harmonious”

Weapon: Fan that reads “Xue is Beautiful” on one side and “Others are Ugly” on the opposite.

The sect leader of Sisheng Peak, Xue Meng’s father, and Mo Ran’s uncle. Jovial, boisterous, and made out of 100 percent wifeguy material, Xue Zhengyong takes his duty to protect the common people of the lower cultivation realm very much to heart.

Madam Wang

王夫人

Xue Meng’s mother, lady of Sisheng Peak, and Mo Ran’s aunt. Timid and unassuming, she originally hails from Guyueye Sect and specializes in the healing arts.

A-Li

阿狸

Madam Wang’s cat. Not pregnant, just fat.

SISHENG PEAK ELDERS

The names of Sisheng Peak’s elders vary in origin. Most of their

names come from the constellation Ursa Major, such as Chu Wanning's "Yuheng." Three elders take their names from the Sha Po Lang star triad used in a form of fortune-telling based on Chinese astrology.

Jielü Elder

戒律长老 Jielü, "discipline"

In charge of meting out discipline.

Xuanji Elder

璇玑长老 Xuanji, "Megrez, the delta Ursae Majoris star"

Kind and gentle; practices an easy cultivation method. Popular with the disciples.

Lucun Elder

禄存长老 Lucun, "Phecda, the gamma Ursae Majoris star"

Beautiful and foppish. Has a habit of phrasing things in a questionable manner.

Qisha Elder

七杀长老 Qisha, "Polis, the Power Star in Sha Po Lang"

Very done with Lucun Elder.

Pojun Elder

破军长老 Pojun, "Alkaid, the Ruinous Star in Sha Po Lang"

Forthright and spirited.

Tanlang Elder

贪狼长老 Tanlang, “Dubhe, the Flirting Star in Sha Po Lang”

Sardonic and ungentle with his words. Skilled in the healing arts, and on pretty bad terms with Chu Wanning.

JINCHENG LAKE

Fake “Gouchen the Exalted”

勾陈上宫 Gouchen, “Curved Array, part of the Ursa Minor constellation”; shanggong, “exalted”)

An enigmatic figure who pretended to be the real Gouchen the Exalted, the God of Weaponry. He is in truth a corpse controlled by a white chess piece in a mysterious Zhenlong Chess Formation.

Wangyue

望月 Wangyue, “full moon”; alternatively, “gazing at the moon”

A huge, turquoise-black dragon who lives in Jincheng Lake. In their previous lifetime, he gave Mo Ran his sword, Bugui, in exchange for a plum blossom from the waist of the mountain.

Heart-Pluck Willow

摘心柳 Zhaixin Liu, “Heart-Pluck Willow”

The spirit of the willow tree in Jincheng Lake, which shelters Gouchen the Exalted’s arsenal of holy weapons.

PEACH BLOSSOM SPRINGS

Eighteen

十八

A member of the feathered tribe, and the eighteenth in the tribe to cultivate a human form. In charge of introductions to Peach Blossom Springs, as well as the cultivators training in the attack division.

Elder Immortal

羽民上仙 Yumin, “feathered tribe”; shangxian, “elder immortal”

The master of Peach Blossom Springs, and the first in the feathered tribe to cultivate a human form. Though she looks to be a young woman, her true age is unknown.

ILLUSORY LIN’AN

Chu Lan

楚澜 Surname Chu; given name Lan, “to swell; billowing”

Chu Xun’s young son, around three or four years old, who bears a strong resemblance to Chu Wanning-as-Xia Sini. A sweet-natured, generous child.

Lin Wan’er

林婉儿 Surname Lin; given name Wan’er,“gentle, graceful”

Also referred to as Madam Chu. Chu Xun’s wife, who passed away not long after Chu Lan’s birth.

Xiaoman

小满 Xiaoman, “The eighth of twenty-four solar terms in

traditional Chinese lunisolar calendars”

A young man of Lin’an, aged fourteen or fifteen, whose adoptive father was killed during the breach in the barrier.

Skeleton King

骷髅王

One of the nine kings of the ghost realm. Referred to as “the ghost king” during the Lin’an incident until his specific identity was revealed. He bears a grudge against Chu Xun for daring to defy him.

NANKE TOWN (UNDERWORLD)

Chu Xun

楚洵 Surname Chu; given name Xun, “truly”

An upright and powerful yet gentle cultivator who died over two hundred years ago in Lin’an City. Mo Ran and Chu Wanning met an illusory emulation of him during their Domain of Fiends trial back in Peach Blossom Springs. He bears a strong resemblance to Chu Wanning.

Rong Jiu

容九 Surname Rong; given name Jiu, “nine”

A prostitute in a brothel in the pleasure district near Sisheng Peak. In his previous lifetime, he was greatly favored by Mo Ran, but repaid him by attempting to steal Mo Ran’s cultivation for Chang Da, and eventually died of an STI. In the current timeline, his plot was foiled by the newly reborn Mo Ran, who robbed him blind.

Fourth Ghost King (四鬼王)

One of the nine kings of the ghost realm. Indulgent, hedonistic, and short-tempered, with a fondness for mortal pleasures: good food and great beauties, men and women alike.

Unnamed Gatekeeper

A soldier who died in battle from a stab wound, who now sits at the Ghost Gate as the immigration officer for the underworld.

Unnamed painter-scholar

A scholar who likely starved to death due to being unable to sell his landscape paintings.

RUFENG SECT

Ye Wangxi

叶忘昔 Surname Ye; given name Wangxi, “to forget the past”

A disciple of Rufeng Sect who was adopted by Rufeng Sect’s chief elder. Highly regarded by the sect leader of Rufeng Sect, and a competent, chivalric, and upright sort. Mo Ran noted that in their previous lifetime, Ye Wangxi was second only to Chu Wanning in the entire cultivation world.

Nangong Si

南宫弼 Surname Nangong; given name Si, “to ride, or horse”

The only son of Rufeng Sect’s leader, who in their previous lifetime died before Mo Ran’s ascension. Brash, headstrong, and volatile

in temperament. He rides on his faewolf, has a hearty appetite for meat and wine, and an antagonistic relationship with Ye Wangxi.

Naobaijin

瑙白金 Nao, “carnelian”; bai “white”; jin “gold”

Nangong Si’s faewolf. Thrice the height of a human, with carnelian-red eyes, snow-white fur, and gold claws.

Song Qiutong (Present)

宋秋桐 Surname Song; given name Qiutong, “autumn, tung tree”

A Butterfly-Boned Beauty Feast who bears a resemblance to Shi Mei. After being rescued by Ye Wangxi, she joins Rufeng Sect as a disciple. In the previous lifetime, Taxian-jun took her as his wife and empress after burning Rufeng Sect. She also shares a name with a character in *Dream of the Red Chamber*.

XUANYUAN PAVILION / RAINBELL ISLE

Second Pavilion Master

二阁主

A girl who looks no older than eleven or twelve, but who is in actuality over a hundred years old. As Second Pavilion Master of Xuanyuan Pavilion, she acts as auction master for the offered goods.

Hanlin the Sage

寒鳞圣手 Han, “cold”; lin, “scales”; shengshou,“highly skilled, sage doctor”

An elder of Guyueye Sect. Highly skilled in refining pills and medicines.

BITAN MANOR

Li Wuxin

李无心 Surname Li; given name Wuxin, "'an empty state of consciousness' in buddhist meditation"

Leader of the recently established Bitan Manor. A man in his fifties, with a pair of long, flowing whiskers. Smooth-talking and somewhat condescending to those he views as beneath himself.

Zhen Congming

甄淙明 Surname Zhen; given name Congming "water gurgling, bright/clever"

The thirteenth direct disciple of Li Wuxin. Ignorant, and ignorant of his own ignorance. His name is a homonym for the phrase "very smart."

OTHER CHARACTERS

Mei Hanxue

梅含雪 Surname Mei; given name Hanxue, "to hold, snow"

A striking cultivator with pale gold hair and jade green eyes, Mei Hanxue is the head disciple of Kunlun Taxue Palace who stayed with the Xue family at Sisheng Peak for a short time as a child. He is skilled in various arts, including dance and playing musical instruments, and is an

appreciator of wine and song. Known as “Da-shixiong” to the lady cultivators who flock around him, as well as by less flattering epithets to others, namely Xue Meng and Ye Wangxi.

Chang Da

常大 Surname Chang; family status: eldest

The eldest son of a wealthy salt merchant family in Yizhou. In the previous lifetime, he bought Rong Jiu’s freedom and took Rong Jiu into his household in exchange for Mo Ran’s cultivation.

Luo Xianxian

罗纤纤 Surname Luo; given name Xianxian, “delicate, slender”

A gentle, kind young girl of Butterfly Town, who was childhood sweethearts with and eventually married to Chen Bohuan, eldest son of the Chen family who lived next door. She was taken advantage of by the Chens after her father’s death, and eventually died and came back to haunt them as a malicious ghost.

Master Huaizui

怀罪 Huai, “to bear, to think of”; zui, “sins, guilt, blame”

A monk of Wubei Temple. Renowned in the cultivation world for his choice to remain in the mortal realm despite having achieved enlightenment and being able to ascend to immortality. Master Huaizui has been in seclusion in Wubei Temple for over a century, and is reportedly able to wield the “Rebirth” technique of the three forbidden techniques. Despite his age, his physical appearance is that of a man in his early thirties.

Liu-gong (刘公)

An elderly servant of Taxian-jun in his previous lifetime.

Mo Ran's Mother (Unnamed)

Mo Ran's mother, who raised him on her own. A talented singer and dancer, she performed on the streets to earn money to keep Mo Ran and herself fed. Compassionate and kind despite the misery of her circumstances, she is described by Mo Ran as his first moral "lighthouse."

Sects and Locations

THE TEN GREAT SECTS

The cultivation world is divided into the upper and lower cultivation realms. Most of the ten great sects are located within the upper cultivation realm, while Sisheng Peak is the only great sect within the lower cultivation realm.

Sisheng Peak

死生之巅 Sisheng zhi dian, “the peak of life and death”

A sect in the lower cultivation realm located in modern day Sichuan. It sits near the boundary between the mortal realm and the ghost realm, and was founded relatively recently by Xue Zhengyong and his brother. The uniform of Sisheng Peak is light armor in dark blue with silver trim, and members of the sect practice cultivation methods that do not require abstinence from meat or other foods. The sect’s name refers to both its physical location in the mountains as well as the metaphorical extremes of life and death. Xue Zhengyong named many locations in Sisheng Peak after places and entities in the underworld because the sect is located in an area thick with ghostly yin energy, and he is furthermore not the sort to think up conventionally nice-sounding, formal names.

Aaaaah (啊啊啊) and Waaaah Cliffs (哇哇哇)

Where Frostsky Hall is located. Named by Xue Zhengyong as an expression of the grief he felt in the days following his brother’s death.

Frostsky Hall (霜天殿)

A hall in Sisheng Peak where bodies are kept until burial.

Heaven-Piercing Tower (通天塔)

The location where Mo Ran first met Chu Wanning as well as the location where, in his past life, he laid himself to rest.

Loyalty Hall (丹心殿)

The main hall of Sisheng Peak. Taxian-jun renamed it Wushan Palace (巫山殿) when he took over the sect.

Mengpo Hall (孟婆堂)

The dining hall at Sisheng Peak. Named after the mythological old woman who distributes memory-erasing soup to souls before they are reborn.

Platform of Sin and Virtue (善恶台)

A platform where public events in Sisheng Peak, including punishment and announcements, are carried out.

Red Lotus Pavilion (红莲水榭)

Chu Wanning's residence. An idyllic pavilion surrounded by rare red lotuses. Some have been known to call it "Red Lotus Hell" or the "Pavilion of Broken Legs." In the previous lifetime, Chu Wanning's body was kept at the Red Lotus Pavilion after his death, preserved by Taxian-jun's spiritual energy.

Silk-Rinse Hall (浣纱堂)

The tailoring hall of Sisheng Peak, which creates and tailors clothing for members of the sect.

Three Lives Platform (三生台)

A platform in Sisheng Peak. Named after the mythological stone in the underworld located by Naihe Bridge that records a soul's past, present, and future lives.

Linyi Rufeng Sect

临沂儒风门 Rufeng, "honoring Confucian ideals"

A sect in the upper cultivation realm located in Linyi, a prefecture in modern day Shandong Province. Has seventy-two cities and is known for being affluent and well-respected. In Taxian-jun's lifetime, he burned them all to the ground.

Kunlun Taxue Palace

昆仑踏雪宫 Taxue, "stepping softly across snow"

A sect in the upper cultivation realm located on the Kunlun Mountain range. Its name refers to both the physical location of the sect in the snowy Kunlun Mountain range and the ethereal grace of the cultivators within the sect.

Guyueye

孤月夜 Guyueye, "a lonely moon in the night sky"

A sect in the upper cultivation realm located on Rainbell Isle. They focus on the medicinal arts. The name is a reference to the solitary and

isolated nature of Guyueye—the island is a lone figure in the water, much like the reflection of the moon, cold and aloof.

Rainbell Isle (霖铃屿)

Not an actual island, but the back of an enormous ancient tortoise, which was bound to the founder of the sect by a blood pact to carry the entirety of Guyueye sect on its shell.

Xuanyuan Pavilion

A subsidiary operation of Guyueye, and a trading post well known in the cultivation world. Xuanyuan is a name for the Yellow Emperor, a legendary Chinese historical figure and deity, who was one of the Three Sovereigns and Five Deities alongside Fuxi.

Fragrance Inn

An inn on Rainbell Isle.

Wubei Temple

无悲寺 wubei, “without sadness/grief”

A sect in the upper cultivation realm. Disciples of Wubei Temple are monks.

Bitan Manor

碧潭庄 bitan, “green pool”

A recently established and up-and-coming sect in the upper cultivation realm. Barriers are *not* their specialty.

Peach Blossom Springs

Peach Blossom Springs (桃花源)

Home of the feathered tribe, located beyond the maze of Mount Jiuhua and within the land of the immortals. *The Peach Blossom Spring* is a fable written by Chinese poet Tao Yuanming, in which the eponymous setting is an ethereal utopia where people live a peaceful, prosperous existence in harmony with nature, unaware of the outside world. In popular culture, the setting has become a symbol of an ideal world, and it has been depicted in many paintings, poems, music, and so forth.

Zhuque (朱雀)

The land of immortals. (See entry on the *Vermilion Bird* in the glossary for more details.)

Mount Jiuhua (九华山)

A mountain with a snowy summit. The path to Peach Blossom Springs begins at the foot of Mount Jiuhua. Mount Jiuhua in modern China is a site sacred to the Kṣitigarbha Bodhisattva, and is located in Anhui Province.

Ancestral Abyss (始祖深渊)

An abyss within Peach Blossom Springs, filled with roaring flames where neither flora nor fauna survive. Frenzied demon owls live within, making their nests out of the abyssal flames. They hide during the day and emerge only at night. According to legend, the abyss was where the Vermilion Bird ascended.

Dewsip Pavilion (饮露阁)

A pavilion where visitors to Peach Blossom Springs are received.

Zhurong Cave (祝融洞)

Where cultivators at Peach Blossom Springs meditate to refine their cultivation and train their inner spiritual energy against the burning yang energy of the cave. Zhurong refers to a figure in Chinese mythology who is associated with the cardinal direction of south and the element of fire.

Asura Arena (修罗场)

Where cultivators at Peach Blossom Springs go to engage in practice matches against one another.

Stargazing Cliffs (观星崖)

Where cultivators at Peach Blossom Springs attend Eighteen's evening lectures.

Spirit Lake Tavern (灵湖楼)

A tavern located in the western market of Peach Blossom Springs.

Campsis Pavilion (凌霄阁)

A residential pavilion where guests of Peach Blossom Springs are hosted.

ILLUSORY LIN'AN

Lin'an City (临安城)

The setting of an illusory realm where Mo Ran and Xia Sini undergo their trial.

Putuo (普陀)

The destination of the refugees from Lin'an during the first ghost realm barrier breach. Putuo in modern China is a location sacred to Guanyin.

Qiantang River (钱塘江)

The river by which Lin'an City is located.

City God Temple (城隍庙)

A temple dedicated to the god of the walls and moats that protect cities. Nearly every city has its own City God Temple.

UNDERWORLD

Underworld (阴间/鬼界/地府)

The realm of the dead, where spirits go to await reincarnation, or are sent to one of the eighteen hells to be punished, depending on their accumulated karma.

Ghost Gate (鬼门关)

The holding place and entrance of the underworld. Essentially the immigration checkpoint for the newly dead.

Eighteen Hells (十八层)

Eighteen levels within the underworld where souls suffer to dispel bad karma from committing heinous deeds. Each level specializes in different types of punishments for different types of crimes.

Infinite Hells (无间地狱)

The deepest and most terrible level of hell, where those who have committed grave crimes in life suffer without respite.

Nanke Town (南柯乡)

The first level of the underworld, where the deceased stay as they await their summons by the judge of the underworld to stand trial and receive judgment.

Tailwind Hall (顺风楼)

A place in Nanke Town where one can go to seek information, whether to find people or investigate matters in the living world.

Ailing Souls Sanitarium (病魂馆)

The underworld's infirmary.

OTHER

Tianyin Pavilion

天音阁 tianyin, "heavenly/divine sound"

An independent organization set up by the ten great sects that oversees trials and the imprisonment of criminals. They manage a prison

that is reserved for criminals who have committed heinous crimes.

Spiritual Mountain (灵山)

Where inter-sect meetings and competitions are held.

Yangzhou Port (扬州口岸)

Yangzhou is a city in Jiangsu province, historically one of the wealthiest cities in China.

Wuchang Town

无常镇 Wuchang, “the Buddhist doctrine of impermanence”

A town not far from Sisheng Peak.

House of Drunken Jade (醉玉楼)

A high-class pleasure house in Xiangtan, famed for its theater, star songstress, and food. It burned down not long before the events of the current timeline.

Caidie Town, a.k.a. Butterfly Town (彩蝶镇)

A town noted for its relative prosperity compared to its neighbors. Its specialty exports are flowers, fragrance, and perfume powder. It also cleaves to the tradition of ghost marriages.

Dawning Peak (旭映峰)

A sacred mountain located in the upper cultivation realm, within the territory of Linyi Rufeng Sect. Known as the place where Gouchen the Exalted forged the Heavenly Emperor’s sword, it is now a pilgrimage

site for cultivators seeking holy weapons.

Dai City (岱城)

A mildly prosperous city by the foot of Dawning Peak. Caters to traveling cultivators on their way to Jincheng Lake.

Jincheng Lake (金成池)

A lake at the summit of Dawning Peak that remains frozen over year-round. According to legend, it was formed by a drop of Gouchen the Exalted's blood, shed as he forged the Heavenly Emperor's holy sword.

Name Guide

Courtesy Names

Courtesy names were a tradition reserved for the upper class and were typically granted at the age of twenty. While it was generally a male-exclusive tradition, there is historical precedent for women adopting courtesy names after marriage. It was furthermore considered disrespectful for peers of the same generation to address one another by their birth name, especially in formal or written communication. Instead, one's birth name was used by elders, close friends, and spouses.

This tradition is no longer practiced in modern China, but is commonly seen in wuxia and xianxia media. As such, many characters in these novels have more than one name in these stories, though the tradition is often treated malleably for the sake of storytelling. For example, in *Husky*, characters receive their courtesy names at the age of fifteen rather than twenty.

Diminutives, nicknames, and name tags

A-: Friendly diminutive. Always a prefix. Usually for monosyllabic names, or one syllable out of a two-syllable name.

Da-: A prefix meaning "eldest."

Doubling: Doubling a syllable of a person's name can be a nickname, i.e. "Mengmeng"; it has childish or cutesy connotations.

-er: A word for "son" or "child." Added to a name, it expresses affection. Similar to calling someone "Little" or "Sonny." Always a suffix.

Xiao-: A diminutive meaning "little." Always a prefix.

Family

All of these terms can be used alone or with the person's name.

Di/Didi: Younger brother or a younger male friend.

Ge/Gege: Older brother or an older male friend.

Jie/Jiejie/Zizi: Older sister or an older female friend; "zizi" is a regional variant of "jieije."

Mei/Meimei: Younger sister or a younger female friend.

Cultivation

-jun: A term of respect, often used as a suffix after a title.

Daozhang/Xianjun: Polite terms of address for cultivators, equivalent to "Mr. Cultivator." Can be used alone as a title or attached to someone's family name. Xianjun has an implication of immortality.

Qianbei: A respectful title or suffix for someone older, more experienced, and/or more skilled in a particular discipline. Not to be used for blood relatives.

Xianzhu: "Immortal lord/leader." Used in *Husky* as a respectful title for Eighteen, the leader of Peach Blossom Springs.

Zongshi: A title or suffix for a person of particularly outstanding skill; largely only applied to cultivators in the story of *Husky*.

Cultivation Sects

Shizun: Teacher/master. For one's master in one's own sect. Gender neutral. Literal meaning is "honored/venerable master" and is a more respectful address, though Shifu is not disrespectful.

Shizu: Grand-teacher/master. For the master of one's master.

Shixiong/Shige: Older martial brother. For senior male members

of one's own sect. Shige is a more familiar variant.

Shijie: Older martial sister. For senior female members of one's own sect.

Shidi: Younger martial brother. For junior male members of one's own sect.

Shimei: Younger martial sister. For junior female members of one's own sect.

Shiniang: Wife of shizun/shifu.

Zhangmen/Zhuangzhu/ Zunzhu: "Sect leader/Manor leader/ Esteemed leader." Used to refer to the leader of the sect. Can be used on its own or appended to a family name, e.g., Xue-zunzhu.

Other

Gong/gonggong: A title or suffix. Can be used to refer to an elderly man, a man of high status, a grandfather, a father-in-law, or in a palace context, a eunuch.

Gongzi: Young master of an affluent household, or a polite way to address young men.

Taizi: "Crown prince." A respectful title of address for the next in line to the throne.

Yifu: Person formally acknowledged as one's father; sometimes a "godfather."

Pronunciation Guide

Mandarin Chinese is the official state language of mainland China, and pinyin is the official system of romanization in which it is written. As Mandarin is a tonal language, pinyin uses diacritical marks (e.g., ā, á, ǎ, à) to indicate these tonal inflections. Most words use one of four tones, though some (as in "de" in the title below) are a neutral tone. Furthermore, regional variance can change the way native Chinese speakers pronounce the same word. For those reasons and more, please consider the guide below a simplified introduction to pronunciation of select character names and sounds from the world of Husky.

More resources are available at sevenseasdanmei.com

NAMES

Èrhā hé tā de bái māo shī zūn

Èr as in **uh**

Hā as in **ha**rdy

Hé as in **hurt**

Tā as in **ta**rdy

De as in **di**rt

Bái as in **bye**

Māo as in **mou**th

Shī as in **shh**

Z as in **z**oom, ūn as in harp**oon**

Mò Rán

Mò as in **mo**ron

Rán as in **run**ning

Chǔ **W**ǎ**nníng**

Chǔ as in **choo**se

Wǎn as in **wan**ting

Níng as in run**ning**

Xuē Méng

X as in the **s** in **s**ilk, uē as in **weh**

M as in the **m** in **m**other, é as in **uh**, **ng** as in so**ng**

Shī Mèi

Shī as in **shh**

Mèi as in **may**

GENERAL CONSONANTS

Some Mandarin Chinese consonants sound very similar, such as z/c/s and zh/ch/sh. Audio samples will provide the best opportunity to learn the difference between them.

X: somewhere between the **sh** in **sh**eep and **s** in **s**ilk

Q: a very aspirated **ch** as in **ch**arm

C: **ts** as in pan**ts**

Z: **z** as in **z**oom

S: **s** as in **s**ilk

CH: **ch** as in **ch**arm

ZH: **dg** as in do**dg**e

SH: **sh** as in **sh**ave

G: hard **g** as in **g**raphic

GENERAL VOWELS

The pronunciation of a vowel may depend on its preceding consonant. For example, the “i” in “shi” is distinct from the “i” in “di.” Vowel pronunciation may also change depending on where the vowel appears in a word, for example the “i” in “shi” versus the “i” in “ting.” Finally, compound vowels are often—though not always—pronounced as conjoined but separate vowels. You’ll find a few of the trickier compounds below.

IU: as in **ewe**

IE: **ye** as in **ye**s

UO: **war** as in **war**m

APPENDIX

Glossary

Glossary

While not required reading, this glossary is intended to offer further context for the many concepts and terms utilized throughout this novel as well as provide a starting point for learning more about the rich culture from which these stories were written.

GENRES

Danmei

Danmei (耽美 / "indulgence in beauty") is a Chinese fiction genre focused on romanticized tales of love and attraction between men. It is analogous to the BL (boys' love) genre in Japanese media and is better understood as a genre of plot than a genre of setting. For example, though many danmei novels feature wuxia or xianxia settings, others are better understood as tales of sci-fi, fantasy, or horror.

Wuxia

Wuxia (武侠 / "martial heroes") is one of the oldest Chinese literary genres and consists of tales of noble heroes fighting evil and injustice. It often follows martial artists, monks, or rogues who live apart from the ruling government, which is often seen as useless or corrupt. These societal outcasts—both voluntary and otherwise—settle disputes among themselves, adhering to their own moral codes over the law.

Characters in wuxia focus primarily on human concerns, such as political strife between factions and advancing their own personal sense of justice. True wuxia is low on magical or supernatural elements. To Western moviegoers, a well-known example is *Crouching Tiger, Hidden*

Dragon.

Xianxia

Xianxia (仙侠 / “immortal heroes”) is a genre related to wuxia that places more emphasis on the supernatural. Its characters often strive to become stronger, with the end goal of extending their lifespan or achieving immortality.

Xianxia heavily features Daoist themes, while cultivation and the pursuit of immortality are both genre requirements. If these are not the story’s central focus, it is not xianxia. *Husky* is considered part of both the danmei and xianxia genres.

TERMINOLOGY

Barriers: A type of magical shield. In *Husky*, a barrier separates the mortal realm and the ghost realm, and Chu Wanning is noted to be especially skilled in creating barriers.

Classical Chinese Chess (weiqi): Weiqi is the oldest known board game in human history. The board consists of a many-lined grid upon which opponents play unmarked black and white stones as game pieces to claim territory.

Colors:

White: Death, mourning, purity. Used in funerals for both deceased and the mourners.

Red: Happiness, good luck. Used for weddings.

Purple: Divinity and immortality; often associated with nobility, homosexuality (in the modern context), and demonkind (in the xianxia genre).

Courtesy Names: A courtesy name is given to an individual when they come of age. (*See Name Guide for more information*.)

Cultivation/cultivators: Cultivators are practitioners of spirituality and the martial arts. They seek to gain understanding of the will of the universe while also increasing personal strength and extending their lifespan.

Cut-sleeve: A term for a gay man. Comes from a tale about an emperor's love for, and relationship with, a male politician. The emperor was called to the morning assembly, but his lover was asleep on his robe. Rather than wake him, the emperor cut off his own sleeve.

Dragon: Great beasts who wield power over the weather. Chinese dragons differ from their Western counterparts as they are often benevolent, bestowing blessings and granting luck. They are associated with the Heavens, the Emperor, and yang energy.

Dual Cultivation: A cultivation technique involving sex between participants that is meant to improve cultivation prowess. Can also be used as a simple euphemism for sex.

Eyes: Descriptions like "phoenix eyes" or "peach-blossom eyes" refer to eye shape. Phoenix eyes have an upturned sweep at their far corners, whereas peach-blossom eyes have a rounded upper lid and are often considered particularly alluring.

Face: *Mianzi* (面子), generally translated as "face," is an important concept in Chinese society. It is a metaphor for a person's reputation and can be extended to further descriptive metaphors. For example, "having face" refers to having a good reputation and "losing face" refers to having one's reputation hurt. Meanwhile, "giving face" means deferring to someone else to help improve their reputation, while "not wanting face" implies that a person is acting so poorly/shamelessly that they clearly don't care about their reputation at all. "Thin face" refers to someone easily embarrassed or prone to offense at perceived slights. Conversely, "thick face" refers to someone not easily embarrassed and

immune to insults.

Fae: Fae, *yao* (妖), refers to natural creatures, such as animals, plants, or even inanimate objects, who over time absorb spiritual energy and gain spiritual awareness to cultivate a human form. They are sometimes referred to as “demons” or “monsters,” though they are not inherently evil. In *Husky*, faewolves (妖狼) are a rare and expensive breed of wolf. Similarly, the feathered tribe are beings who are half-immortal (仙) and half-fae.

The Five Elements: Also known as the *wuxing* (五行 / “Five Phases”) in Chinese philosophy: fire, water, wood, metal, earth. Each element corresponds to a planet: Mars, Mercury, Jupiter, Venus, and Saturn, respectively. In *Husky*, cultivators’ spiritual cores correspond with one or two elements; for example, Chu Wanning’s elements are metal and wood.

Fire (火 / huo)

Water (水 / shui)

Wood (木 / mu)

Metal (金 / jin)

Earth (土 / tu)

Haitang: The *haitang* tree (海棠花), also known as crabapple or Chinese flowering apple, is endemic to China. The recurring motif for Chu Wanning is specifically the *xifu haitang* variety. In flower language, haitang symbolizes unrequited love.

Inedia: A common ability that allows an immortal to survive

without mortal food or sleep by sustaining themselves on purer forms of energy based on Daoist fasting. Depending on the setting, immortals who have achieved inedia may be unable to tolerate mortal food, or they may be able to choose to eat when desired. The cultivation taught by Sisheng Peak notably does not rely on this practice.

Jade: Jade is a culturally and spiritually important mineral in China. Its durability, beauty, and the ease with which it can be utilized for crafting decorative and functional pieces alike has made it widely beloved since ancient times. The word might evoke green jade (the mineral jadeite), but Chinese texts are often referring to white jade (the mineral nephrite), as when a person's skin is described as "the color of jade."

Jianghu: A staple of wuxia, the jianghu (江湖, "rivers and lakes") describes an underground society of martial artists, monks, rogues, and artisans and merchants who settle disputes between themselves per their own moral codes.

Lotus: This flower symbolizes purity of the heart and mind, as lotuses rise untainted from the muddy waters they grow in. It also signifies the holy seat of the Buddha.

Meridians: The means by which qi travels through the body, like a magical bloodstream. Medical and combat techniques that focus on redirecting, manipulating, or halting qi circulation focus on targeting the meridians at specific points on the body, known as acupoints. Techniques that can manipulate or block qi prevent a cultivator from using magical techniques until the qi block is lifted.

Moe: A Japanese term referring to cuteness or vulnerability in a character that evokes a protective feeling from the reader. Originally applied largely to female characters, the term has since seen expanded use.

Mythical Figures: Several entities from Chinese mythology make an appearance in the world of *Husky*, including:

Fuxi: Emperor of the heavens, sometimes directly called Heavenly Emperor Fuxi. A figure associated with Chinese creation mythology.

Vermilion Bird: The *Vermilion Bird* (朱雀上神) is one of four mythical beasts in Chinese constellations, representing the cardinal direction South, the element of fire, and the season of summer.

Yanluo: King of hell or the supreme judge of the underworld. His role in the underworld is to pass judgment on the dead, sending souls on to their next life depending on the karma they accrued from their last one.

Phoenix: Fenghuang (凤凰 / "phoenix"), a legendary bird said to only appear in times of peace and to flee when a ruler is corrupt. They are heavily associated with femininity, the empress, and happy marriages.

Pills and Elixirs: Magic medicines that can heal wounds, improve cultivation, extend life, etc. In Chinese culture, these medicines are usually delivered in pill form, and the pills are created in special kilns.

Pleasure House: Courtesans at these establishments provided

entertainment of many types, ranging from song and dance to more intimate pleasures.

Qi: *Qi* (气) is the energy in all living things. There is both righteous qi and evil or poisonous qi.

Cultivators strive to cultivate qi by absorbing it from the natural world and refining it within themselves to improve their cultivation base. A cultivation base refers to the amount of qi a cultivator possesses or is able to possess. In xianxia, natural locations such as caves, mountains, or other secluded places with beautiful scenery are often rich in qi, and practicing there can allow a cultivator to make rapid progress in their cultivation.

Cultivators and other qi manipulators can utilize their life force in a variety of ways, including imbuing objects with it to transform them into lethal weapons, or sending out blasts of energy to do damage. Cultivators also refine their senses beyond normal human levels. For instance, they may cast out their spiritual sense to gain total awareness of everything in a region around them or to sense potential danger.

Qi Circulation: The metabolic cycle of qi in the body, where it flows from the dantian to the meridians and back. This cycle purifies and refines qi, and good circulation is essential to cultivation. In xianxia, qi can be transferred from one person to another through physical contact, and it can heal someone who is wounded if the donor is trained in the art.

Qi Deviation: A qi deviation (走火入魔 / “to catch fire and enter demonhood”) occurs when one’s cultivation base becomes unstable. Common causes include an unstable emotional state and/or strong

negative emotions, practicing cultivation methods incorrectly, reckless use of forbidden or high-level arts, or succumbing to the influence of demons and evil spirits. When qi deviation arises from mental or emotional causes, the person is often said to have succumbed to their inner demons or "heart demons" (心魔).

Symptoms of qi deviation in fiction include panic, paranoia, sensory hallucinations, and death, whether by the qi deviation itself causing irreparable damage to the body or as a result of its symptoms—such as leaping to one's death to escape a hallucination. Common fictional treatments for qi deviation include relaxation (voluntary or forced by an external party), massage, meditation, or qi transfer from another individual.

Qiankun Pouch: (乾坤囊/ "universe pouch") A pouch containing an extradimensional space within it, capable of holding more than the physical exterior dimensions of the pouch would suggest.

Qinggong: Qinggong (轻功) is a cultivator's ability to move swiftly through the air as if on the wind.

Red Thread of Fate: The red thread imagery originates in legend and has become a Chinese symbol for fated love. An invisible red thread is said to be tied around the limb or finger of the two individuals destined to fall in love, forever linking them.

Reigning Years: Chinese emperors took to naming the eras of their reign for the purpose of tracking historical records. The names often reflected political agendas or the current reality of the socioeconomic landscape.

Shidi, Shixiong, Shizun, etc: Chinese titles and terms used to indicate a person's role or rank in relation to the speaker. Because of the robust nature of this naming system, and a lack of nuance in translating many to English, the original titles have been maintained. *(See Name Guide for more information)*

Soul-Calling Lantern: In the world of *Husky*, soul-calling lanterns (引魂灯) are lanterns embroidered with complex spell patterns, which can only be lit and maintained using spiritual energy. A lit lantern can illuminate the human soul of a person willing to return and will hold the human soul within to be brought back and reunited with the other immortal souls and corporeal spirits. If the wielder of the lantern were to give up or have second thoughts, the human soul would be devoured.

Spiritual core: A spiritual core (灵丹/灵核) is the foundation of a cultivator's power. It is typically formed only after ten years of hard work and study.

Spiritual Root: In *Husky,* spiritual roots (灵根) are associated with a cultivator's innate talent and elemental affinities. Not every cultivator possesses spiritual roots.

Three Immortal Souls and Seven Corporeal Spirits: Hun (魂) and po (魄) are two types of souls in Chinese philosophy and religion. Hun are immortal souls which represent the spirit and intellect, and leave the body after death. Po are corporeal spirits or mortal forms which remain with the body of the deceased. Each soul governs different aspects of a person's being, ranging from consciousness and memory, to

physical function and sensation. Different traditions claim there are different numbers of each, but three hun and seven po (三魂七魄) are common in Daoism.

The Three Realms: Traditionally, the universe is divided into three realms: the **heavenly realm**, the **mortal realm**, and the **ghost realm**. The heavenly realm refers to the heavens and realm of the gods, where gods reside and rule; the mortal realm refers to the human world; and the ghost realm refers to the realm of the dead.

Vinegar: To say someone is drinking vinegar or tasting vinegar means that they're having jealous or bitter feelings. Generally used for a love interest growing jealous while watching the main character receive the attention of a rival suitor.

Wheel of Reincarnation: In Buddhism, reincarnation is part of the soul's continuous cycle of birth, death, and rebirth, known as Samsara: one's karma accumulated through the course of their life determines their circumstances in the next life. The Wheel of Reincarnation (六道轮回), translated literally as "Six Realms of Reincarnation," which souls enter after death, is often represented as having six sections, or realms. Each one represents a different "realm," or state of being, a person may attain depending on their karma: the realm of gods, Asura, humans, animals, ghosts, and demons.

White Moonlight: A romantic trope referring to a distant romantic paragon who is cherished in memory long after that person is gone. Like the moon in the sky, the memory is always present, perfect and unchanging, but like the pale light by one's bedside, it is an

incorporeal shine that can only be admired, not touched. The object of admiration is out of reach, and the admiration is functionally one-way.

Willow Tree: Willow trees in Chinese culture have a plethora of meanings, including friendship, longing, femininity, and more. The Chinese word for willow (柳) is a homonym for the word “stay,” which has led to it being featured in many poems and stories as a symbol of farewell and a reluctance to part.

Yin Energy and Yang Energy: Yin and yang is a concept in Chinese philosophy which describes the complementary interdependence of opposite/contrary forces. It can be applied to all forms of change and differences. Yang represents the sun, masculinity, and the living, while yin represents the shadows, femininity, and the dead, including spirits and ghosts. In fiction, imbalances between yin and yang energy may do serious harm to the body or act as the driving force for malevolent spirits seeking to replenish themselves of whichever energy they lack.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Rou Bao Bu Chi Rou ("Meatbun Doesn't Eat Meat") was a disciple of Sisheng Peak under the Tanlang Elder and the official chronicler of daily life at Wushan Palace. Unable to deal[redacted] after Taxian-jun's suicide, Meatbun took Madam Wang's orange cat, Cai Bao ("Veggiebun"), and fled. Thereafter Meatbun traveled the world to see the sights, making ends meet by writing down all manner of secrets and little-known anecdotes of the cultivation world—which Meatbun had gathered during travel—and selling them on the street side.

NOTABLE WORKS:

"God-Knows-What Rankings"
Top of the Cultivation World Best-Sellers List for ten years straight.

"The Red Lotus Pavilion Decameron"
Banned by Sisheng Peak Sect Leader Xue and Yuheng Elder Chu Wanning; no longer available for sale.

[redacted]
No longer available for sale due to complaints filed by Yuheng Elder Chu Wanning.

[redacted]
2019 winner of the Ghost Realm's Annual Fuxi Roasting Writing Contest

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Dumb
"The Husky & His White Cat Shizun"
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...and others to come. Please look forward to them.

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Footnotes

1. An idiom referring to people who are friends regardless of status or means. The idiom finds its origin in a story: During the Eastern Han dynasty, a scholar named Gong Shamu, in order to raise funds to attend the Imperial College, donned plain clothes and found work pounding rice (using mortar and pestle) at the residence of an official named Wu You. Wu You found him cultured and eloquent, and made friends with him and paid for him to continue his education. Gong Shamu went on to become an accomplished official.

2. 三昧真火, "Samadhi True Fire," is a fire ability or technique that often appears in Chinese classical literature and Daoist culture, most notably with Hong Hai'er in Journey to the West. It is a type of powerful fire that is not easily extinguishable by ordinary water.

3. 聚沙成塔, "Many grains of sand, when amassed, become a tower," a proverb meaning that many small things accumulate to make one large thing. Here, it is the name of a technique.

4. A type of wine brewed with herbal medicines, traditionally drunk during New Year celebrations. It originated as a custom to ward off plagues and has come to represent well-wishes for health in the new year.

5. 瑶光, Yao Guang, known in English as Alkaid or Benetnasch, is the leftmost star in the Big Dipper.

6. Although he calls him “nephew,” Li Wuxin is not implying a blood relation to Mei Hanxue. Here, he uses the familial term in the same spirit as a greasy salesperson referring to a potential customer as “dage” (older brother).

7. “Brothers” here refers more to being close friends than any blood relation.

8. The first line in the song Xue Zhengyong sings is adapted from a line in “Presented to the Recluse Wei” by Tang Dynasty poet Du Fu.

9. “Benefactor, alms giver.” A respectful term used by Buddhist and Daoist monks and priests to address laypeople.

10. Amitabha Buddha, “merciful Buddha,” is a greeting and prayer used by monks.

11. Upon cultivating to enlightenment, a cultivator must first shed their mortal vessel and undergo one or more heavenly trials, possibly among other requirements, before they can transcend to become an immortal.

12. A derogatory epithet used to describe Buddhist monks. It stems from the stereotypical image of a bald monk riding a donkey while begging for alms.

13. Hun (魂) and po (魄) are two types of souls in Chinese philosophy and religion. Hun are immortal souls which leave the body

after death. Po are corporeal spirits which remain with the body of the deceased. Each soul governs different aspects of a person's being, from consciousness and memory to physical function and sensation.

14. 黄泉, huangquan, the underworld.

15. 陪葬, pei zang, items buried with the dead meant to go to the afterlife with them.

16. Bo Ya was a guqin player, and Zhong Ziqi was a person who could understand and appreciate his playing perfectly. When Ziqi died, Bo Ya snapped the strings of his guqin and never played again. Their relationship exemplifies an ideal of friendship based on complete understanding, akin to that of a soulmate.

17. 秀才, xiucai, is the title of someone who's passed the county (lowest) level of the imperial examination system.

18. 君子之交淡如水, "friendship between gentlemen is light as water," has two interpretations. First, that between gentlemen, i.e., learned individuals of high moral caliber, friendship should be easy and natural, clear as water. Second, that maintaining a certain distance in friendship is healthy, and frequent interactions are not required to be good friends who aid one another in times of need.

19. 凤眼, phoenix eyes, and 缝眼, slit eyes, have the same pinyin and sound very similar: feng yan.

20. In ancient times, dogs made of straw were used as sacrificial offerings, then thrown away after. Thus, this term also signifies something lowly and worthless.

21. The wontons here are 馄饨, huntun, the northern variety of wontons, which are mild and typically served in soup. They are distinct from the Sichuan variety of wontons, 抄手, chaoshou, that Chu Wanning makes for Mo Ran, which are wrapped differently and served in a spicy chili oil.

22. Meridian points; Wuli is about two-thirds of the way down the upper arm, Quchi is to the side of the elbow area, and Shangyang is on the index finger, right below the nail.

23. 含笑九泉, “to smile in the underworld,” is an idiom meaning to smile in one’s grave, i.e., to die with no regrets. Mo Ran has taken it literally.

24. Also known as a wooden fish. A Buddhist wooden percussion instrument, used in rituals and to maintain rhythm during chanting.

The Lonely Road to Hell
As Mo Ran accompanies Chu Wanning in pursuit of the mastermind behind the mysterious incidents plaguing his life reborn, Mo Ran finds his hatred for his teacher beginning to waver. Yet all too soon, disaster strikes again: the opening of the Heavenly Rift, a tear in the fabric of the world that would set hell's most terrible demons loose upon humanity.
Despite all he has seen since rebirth, Mo Ran is unprepared to face the greatest tragedy of his past life—the calamity that turned him against his teacher forever and set him on the lonely path to a bloodstained throne. If Mo Ran is to avoid this bitter fate, he must make a new choice and break with the past. But while the tragedy of this life may unfold differently, the sacrifices will be no less great.
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